

## “What Now?”

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Graduate Recognition Sunday

Acts 1:6-14; I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

“In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. . . And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”

“In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders... .” How’s that for a text on a Sunday when we recognize those who are graduating? Usually, I suppose, the younger ones like to think of graduation as being a bit more free from “the authority of the elders.” So, maybe the more important line of this text for such a Sunday is “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. . . [and] the God of all grace. . . will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”

As I look at the list of graduates, I see that most of you have already “commenced,” and within a few hours, this will include all of you. Some of you will be moving away in August. It looks like everyone but our firefighter and paramedic will be going to new schools. Maybe others will actually land some kind of job which, I think, would be a very nice thing for their parents, speaking as a parent.

I suppose schools like to call it call it “commencement” because, with any luck, you never really “graduate,” you never really quit learning. You “commence” with a new phase. And with commencement, like the season of springtime itself, there may be a restless tension for graduates and their parents—a restless tension between joyous beginnings and rueful endings. First Peter calls it “anxiety” and urges us to “cast all our anxiety” upon Him who cares for us.

Sure, graduates are excited about what they have accomplished, maybe even relieved that somehow they managed to squeeze through it all, but they may also be somewhat worried about what is ahead of them, especially as the summer draws to a close. The security of the past is behind them, but the possibilities of the future lay ahead of them. There will be an emptiness when all that they have depended upon is no longer there, but that emptiness will eventually fill up with new friends and teachers, classes and experiences.

Some years ago, I remember reading a column in the newspaper by someone who knew the joys as well as the sorrows of having children: “I see children as kites,” she wrote. “You spend a lifetime trying to get them off the ground. You run with them until you’re both breathless. They crash. They hit the rooftop. They get tangled in trees. You patch and comfort, adjust and teach. You watch them lifted by the wind and assure them that someday they’ll fly. Finally they are airborne: they need more string and you keep letting it out. But with each twist of the ball of twine, there is a sadness that goes with joy. The kite becomes more distant, and you know it won’t be long before that beautiful creature will snap the lifeline that binds you together and will soar as it is meant to soar, free and alone. Only then do you know that you did your job.” I’m not so sure about “free and alone,” or that a parent ever knows that “you did your job,” but I thought the rest of the column made sense.

We in the church are living in similar days, the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost. Between Easter presence and Ascension absence and Pentecost presence, these days are marked by a worrisome tension. The Jesus whom his friends had lost when he was crucified on Good Friday, and then found risen from the dead on Easter, is now gone again after his ascent to intercede for us. Most of the time, it seems, the disciples did not understand much about what Jesus said or did, but it seems there was always something comforting and reassuring about his presence. And now, they look for Jesus where

they last saw him, “gazing into heaven as he went.”

We also know that much of the time, kids don’t understand very much about their parents either, but there is often something comforting and reassuring for them about mom and dad’s presence, even well past high school and college into mid-life.

Come this fall, some of you will be looking for each other where you last saw the other, maybe in a school yard where he used to play; or a bedroom that is now silent (and never needs to be picked-up); or a soccer field where she used to practice; or a bus stop where you would pick him up from school each day. This time between presence and absence and presence again can be quite bewildering.

“When [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes [just like Luke’s Easter] stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven... .” And because these messengers tell the apostles not to stand gazing into heaven, they descend from Olivet and go back to Jerusalem.

You will drop him off at his dorm room, gaze at each other for a while, and then drive the “Sabbath day’s journey” home.

I think it is interesting that Luke makes a point of saying that it was “a Sabbath day’s journey away,” which would have no significance whatsoever if it were not for the fact that Jews do not travel on the Sabbath. With this little phrase, Luke is telling us that we have a new people here, people who have known the resurrected Jesus, people whose lives have been changed, people who are going into all the world with the news about the lordship of Jesus and service in his name.

These women and men were not graduating from school, but I think they may have had similar feelings to those of ours. Like us, they were asking their questions about the future. “What now?” “What’s ahead?” “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” It may be like the question that every parent has had to put up with when going on a long road trip with the kids: “Dad. . . Mom. . . are we there yet?” after ten minutes on the road. “How long is it going to take to get there? . . . How much farther do we have to go?”

“What now?” I know that some of us , not only the graduates, but the rest of us, too, may be asking that question today. Now that I’m all grown up, what’s next? Now that I’ve gotten the degree, what am I supposed to do? Now that I’ve reached the age of ninety, what do I reach for next? A hundred? Now that I’ve retired, what’s left for me to do? Now that the kids are out of the house, what do I fill it with? Maybe an empty nest party. Now that I’ve built my dream home, what do I dream of next? And now that I’m baptized, what do I do?”

Today we overhear what some call Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer,” a prayer which I’ve come to hear as Jesus’ “Worried Prayer” for his disciples. He has washed their feet. He has called them friends. He has eaten with them. Now what?

Jesus seems worried, not about himself, but for those he is about to leave: “I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me.” It is the worried prayer that pastors often hear while ministering to the dying. I’ve noticed that most people who are about to die don’t worry about themselves; they worry about those they are about to leave: “Pastor, I’m afraid for them. I don’t know what they will do without me.”

It is the prayer of parents for their children as they are graduating, or going to high school, or being married, or leaving home for the first time: “Dear Lord, these children you gave me are growing up. I can’t be with them anymore in the same way to take care of them. Protect them. Keep them safe. Guard them from anyone who would hurt them or take advantage of them. Spare them of addictions. Keep them faithful in you.”

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, . . . I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.”

It's a good prayer for parents to pray for their children in the days ahead.

"I will not leave you orphaned . . .," Jesus promises, "I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

"And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."