

Acts 1:1–11 (NRSV)

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he 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 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.”

## You Will Be My Witnesses

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Here we are, after the resurrection, just as Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, and the apostles ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

So, even now, not much has changed. The apostles are asking the same old questions. Last week we joined the risen Christ and two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The disciples thought Jesus was a stranger. They didn’t recognize him, and they complained to Jesus about Jesus saying, “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” In last week’s story the two disciples eventually come to realize that they are in the presence of the risen Christ. They even seem to realize that they were expecting the wrong things from Jesus. They seemed to get it that whatever Jesus was all about, he was not about a political or military triumph. But here we are again—same question, same concern. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

If nothing else, Jesus must have been impressed with the disciples’ doggedness. No matter what he said, no matter what happened to him, no matter how obvious it was that Jesus wasn’t who they wanted him to be, they still thought he might be. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

The problem is deep in the human core. In Biblical and theological terms, ever since the serpent seduced Adam and Eve and tempted them to believe that they could be like God, the human race fell into a state of deep self-centeredness. The story of the garden is more profound than its simple story-line might suggest.

For example, why was Eden paradise? Was it because there Adam and Eve had everything they needed? Was it because Eden was like Shangri-La or Camelot? Was it because the weather was always perfect, the food was always good, and every day was another day of bliss? Maybe at the simplest level. But theologically Eden was paradise because in Eden Adam and Eve were devoted to God and to each other. I don’t mean they were pure and pious and they sang Kumbaya all the time. I mean they had little anxiety for themselves. Their connection with God and with one another was what was most important to them. As God was compassionate for them so were they for God and for one another. There was no isolated self-absorbed I in Eden. Their existence was defined by connection and tender concern.

The serpent seduced Adam and Eve, and he did it through a lie. “You can become like God,” the serpent said. But then he misrepresented who God was. God was for Adam and Eve, but the serpent connived Adam and Eve to believe that God was for God. The serpent convinced Adam and Eve that to be like God was to think only of themselves. When God comes to the garden after they have eaten of the fruit of self-absorption, Adam and Eve hide their nakedness with fig leaves. Again the story’s guileless simplicity stuns us with its wisdom. Suddenly Adam and Eve’s concern turns from God and one another to themselves. Human dignity sinks into shame. All they can think of is their nakedness. Adam and Eve have not become like God; they

have become like the serpent. They have become alienated from God. In truth their expulsion from the garden was but a formality. They had left paradise well before.

It's fair to say, I think, that this human condition of alienation from God, which is characterized by human self-absorption, is what afflicted the apostles. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Lord, are you going to take care of us now? It is the human question.

Jesus answers the question somewhat indirectly. "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." Jesus doesn't just come out and say, "Get over it. This isn't all about you." Jesus loves his disciples, and he knows that they cannot free themselves from the results of the serpent's hideous work; at least they cannot free themselves by themselves. Jesus loves them and knows that to impatiently denounce them would be cruel and to no avail. Gently but firmly he points them in another direction. "It is not for you to know these things."

It's the only thing Jesus can do. After the serpent's deception, the only question Adam and Eve and all humanity know how to ask is a question about themselves and their constant uneasiness. But underlying humanity's uneasiness is another question, one they do not know how to ask, when will our alienation from God come to an end? Jesus understands their deep longing. And he also understands that the alienation will end only when they no longer long for it to.

Have you ever noticed how often we can have the things we most want in life when we no longer are desperate to have them? Love, respect, and happiness, for example, seem to come only when we no longer feverishly grasp after them. Ironically and painfully, the more we crave something, the more it seems to elude us. Only when we turn away from hungering for it does our hunger subside. This is the curse of the serpent. Jesus understands this. He knows that as long as the apostles are driven by their self-seeking thirst, like the woman at the well, they will never fully quench it. And this is true even if their great egocentric desire is to cure their alienation with God. As Luther put it, as long as the heart is curved in on itself, so long as the desire the apostles have points back to themselves, they cannot restore their full relationship with God. For relationship by its very nature is directed away from oneself.

Jesus loves the apostles, and he grieves for their pain, and he knows that by themselves, on their own, they are incapable of making this change of direction. It is the human condition. In a very real sense it is not their fault. It requires more than they are capable of.

So, after Jesus tells them theirs is not to know the times and periods of the future, how or when things are going to work out for them, he goes on to say, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The apostles, I'm sure, don't quite understand what Jesus is saying. Pentecost is next week. When the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost, they will understand more fully. But what he has promised them, even if they don't know what he means, is that what they lack will be given to them. On their own they could not escape the human condition. But Jesus tells them that they will receive power. The Holy Spirit will make it possible for them to change direction.

And when that happens, says Jesus, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." "You will be my witnesses."

In ancient times the word witness meant much the same it does today. First and most straightforwardly it meant to tell the facts, the truth as one has seen and experienced it. For early Christians this was no small matter. Many in Jerusalem and elsewhere doubted the stories about

Jesus. His life, death, resurrection and now ascension were scoffed at. It would be important for those who had been witnesses to testify to their experiences far and wide. If the apostles had not spread the story, if they had not been witnesses to Jesus, we would live in a far different world today than we do.

But that may have been the smallest thing to which Jesus wanted the disciples to witness. If being a witness to Jesus only telling the story and trying to convince people to believe it, it can quickly devolve into another self-centered project. It can quickly become, "I have this truth, Jesus Christ, who has saved me, and he can save you, too. In fact, he is the only way you can be saved. So, you should be like I am and believe in him so you can be saved just like I am." When Genesis says that the serpent was the craftiest creature, it isn't kidding. Even bearing witness to Jesus can become another way in which we lord it over others and become self-righteous. Surely we don't need the Holy Spirit to do that much!

But there is another part of witnessing to the truth of Jesus, and for it we need the power of the Holy Spirit. We can witness that in our brokenness God loved and loves us, nonetheless. We can witness that this unqualified love is who God is. We can witness that God calls us to love one another in the same way, not because others deserve it, not even because we like them, but because they are fellow human beings who are also loved by God. The serpent told Adam and Eve that he could make them like God. The truth was, they were already like God, and the serpent alienated them from that state. By loving, by focusing our love and concern on our fellow creatures, we bear witness to God's love for them and in doing this is our own alienation from God healed. The great and beautiful irony is that our relationship with God is restored at the moment we are least worried about it and most worried about our neighbor.

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He replied, "It is not for you to know (he might have said, it is not for you to worry about). But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This is what we are called to be, witnesses to the love of God. Amen.