

SERMON BY THE REV. BETSY JOHNS ROADMAN, 5/8/05
ST. AUGUSTINE'S CHURCH, CROTON-ON-HUDSON, NY
TEXT: ACTS 1:1-14

I took a very short trip to Chicago this past week to visit our oldest son. I had brought a lot of work with me – sermon notes, EFM reading, some initial plans for confirmation class – that I intended to tackle while traveling and during the time when Keene was at work.

While traveling, though, it was almost impossible to concentrate, because everyone around me – in the gate area at LaGuardia, on the plane before takeoff, in the cab to the hotel – everyone was talking on a cell phone. The noise level was unbelievable. The bells, chimes, and jingles of the phones punctuated a constant stream of conversation. As the last passengers were still boarding the plane, I noticed that in the row ahead of me, every single person was on the phone. Two passengers on one side of the aisle and three on the other side were all carrying on animated conversations – but none of them with each other. I watched in utter amazement as one man worked on a business deal over the phone, which he was holding in one hand, while he viciously beat an oversized carry-on bag into submission as he forced it into the overhead bin – blatantly tossing other peoples' smaller items elsewhere to make room for his. Those whose belongings were being relocated didn't seem to object, or even notice – they were all talking on their phones.

Honestly, aren't we taking multi-tasking to a ridiculous level? It seems that every single second of our lives is filled with an ever-increasing number of activities; that every waking moment is permeated with noise, demands, and expectations.

Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes a strange period of time in the life of Jesus' earliest followers. The Gospel of Luke – the “first book” that the writer of Acts refers to – tells the story of all that Jesus did and taught during his earthly ministry. The Acts of the Apostles – the second book by the same author – tells the story of what the early church did and taught, as Jesus' followers carried on his work in the world. In between, there was this interval of time when things seemed to slow down. Following Jesus' departure, says our text, his friends went to the room where they were staying and devoted themselves to prayer. It sounds to me like a unique opportunity for them to be still and to breathe deeply – just after the intensity of the events surrounding Jesus' final days with them, and just before they would intentionally assume the responsibility of being, themselves, the face, the hands, and the heart of Jesus in the world. A blessed, in-between time.

In our liturgical calendar, we're also in an in-between time. Last Thursday marked the point in the church year when we observe Ascension Day – Jesus' ascent into heaven following the post-resurrection appearances. Next Sunday we celebrate the empowering of Jesus' followers at Pentecost, with the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit. Liturgically, this is an opportunity, briefly, to slow down and to breathe deeply. A blessed, in-between time.

I wonder if an important lesson for us to learn from these examples of in-between times is that less can be more. There is so much to be gained from being still and breathing deeply, though it flies in the face of the rules and expectations of our culture – whose unspoken motto is surely “more is more.”

In our life together as a parish family, we’re clearly in an in-between time – following the departure of one rector and before the arrival of a new one. While there are specific tasks to be accomplished during this period, the goal of calling a priest whose gifts mesh with who we are and who we want to be will likely be hindered if we’re not also using this in-between time as sacred space in which to be still, to breathe deeply, to listen carefully.

And, in our individual lives, many of us are living in in-between times. Such times can feel uncomfortable and awkward – as we’re between jobs or considering a completely different career path; as we’re in an unsettled place in a relationship; when a child has left one phase of development but hasn’t yet found solid footing in the next stage; when treatment for a medical condition has begun, but recovery isn’t yet certain. Our natural tendency is to want to rush through these times; to fill them with productivity; to careen toward the outcome we’re hoping for. But these odd, in-between times can be sacred interludes for quiet, for reflection, for openness to the voice of God.

Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the peace of God, the power of God, and the wisdom of God are within each one of us. It’s true that the ongoing revelation of God is experienced through lots of things “outside” ourselves - our gathering together as the body of Christ; our participation in the liturgy as we hear the words of scripture and respond with spoken prayers. Actually, every aspect of our lives can be a means through which God is revealed. But the revelation of God also happens within each one of us, and in those odd, in-between times, God just might be speaking to us, directly and personally, with implications for our own lives and for the life of our community of faith.

In-between times can be days, weeks, and months; and they can be seconds and minutes. I’d like to propose that for the remainder of today’s worship, we recognize the built-in, in-between times that we tend to unthinkingly glide right past, and receive each as a gift in which to listen for God and to listen to God. I wonder whether our intentional stillness and alert listening to God within us after the sermon, following the creed, and in the slower rhythm of the prayers of the people and the Eucharistic prayer might not only open for us a new path to God, but also encourage us to receive the gift of in-between times in each day as almost endless opportunities to listen to God – those moments in the long line at the store or the post office; between meetings or classes; during traffic jams; while waiting to board a plane.

Be still. Breathe deeply. Listen and receive. Amen.