

# Homily for the Solemnity of the Ascension

May 15-16, 2021

Readings: Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 4: 1-13; Mark 16: 15-20

Preacher: Christine Nowak Kvam

At the time of his Ascension, Jesus gives his followers an enormously important charge: “You will be my witnesses.” Many of the earliest Apostles took on this responsibility by becoming missionaries (and according to Mark 15:17-18 apparently also invincible, multilingual, snake charming exorcists). As baptized members of the Church, we are also called to be Jesus’ witnesses. But for almost all of us that will look very different than it did for the Apostles. How then, in the midst of our own lives, do we witness to Jesus? Today’s readings indicate three practices essential for this task: including everyone, being counter-cultural, and empowering others.

Each one of today’s Scripture passages emphasizes the universal nature of God. The Psalmist rejoices that God is king of *all the earth*, the author of Ephesians asserts that God is *over all and through all and in all*, and Jesus instructed his disciples go into *the whole world* to proclaim the Gospel. There are no exceptions. Jesus doesn’t advise denying the Gospel to people whose political views are in opposition to our own, and Paul doesn’t say that God is in all except those whose lifestyles don’t fit society’s norms. No. The Scripture authors are clear that inclusivity is a hallmark of our God.

This radical inclusivity is one of several ways that being a witness to Jesus involves a willingness to be counter-cultural. The letter to the Ephesians advises living with humility, gentleness, patience, unity, and peace. When was the last time we saw those qualities championed in our 21<sup>st</sup> century American society? Our cultural obsession with power and strength flies in the face of the virtues of humility and gentleness. Having the world at our fingertips with the amazing technology of smartphones has replaced patience with instant satisfaction and often isolates us from one another. And even the quickest look at any news source demonstrates the lack of peace in our world. Being a witness of Jesus requires us to recover these abandoned virtues.

Reclaiming these virtues enables us to shift our focus from ourselves to others. In doing so, we can recognize that being a witness isn't just about oneself. The letter to the Ephesians names various roles within the church—Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors, Teachers—and states that the purpose of these roles is “to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Our task as witnesses is to empower others (*all* others as previously indicated) to recognize their own holiness and embrace their call to share the Good News of God's love in unique and beautiful ways.

Certainly it's a daunting task to be inclusive, counter-cultural, and empowering witnesses of Jesus. But it's possible. I recently read Gregory Boyle, S.J.'s second book *Barking to the Choir: Embracing the Power of Radical Kinship*. (His first book *Tattoos on the Heart* was a 2011 NY Times best-seller—it's extraordinary). His ministry with gang members in Los Angeles is a profound example of witnessing to Jesus through inclusion, counter-cultural gentleness, and empowerment. He writes about Homeboy Industries where members of rival gangs work side by side and support one another. He tells stories of hardened victims and perpetrators of horrific violence breaking down in tears and admitting their pain and need. He praises the senior staff who were once in the same place as the new trainees (some battling addiction, some recently released from incarceration, some stuck in a cycle of violence) and now use their experience to shepherd them to personal and professional growth. Witnesses to Christ abound at Homeboy Industries.

If authentic witness to Jesus can make a difference even in those extraordinarily challenging circumstances, imagine what it can do in our own lives, families, workplaces, and communities. We can take steps toward unity by embracing Jesus' command to include everyone. We can contribute to a shift away from our society's selfishness by living out the counter-cultural values extolled in the letter to the Ephesians. We can use our gifts to help others recognize their own. What better way to celebrate the Ascension than to put into practice the inclusive, counter-cultural, and empowering love of Jesus who we now proclaim is at the right hand of God, the Father of *all*.