
Our Provident Father

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 12 May 2024

Acts 1:1-11 • Ephesians 1:15-23 • Luke 24:44-53



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We often call God our Father, and it is appropriate, for God created us, has ultimate authority over us, and guides us through our lives. Truly, God is both Father and Mother, since creation comes only from God. In human society, we have a similar structure: parents begetting children, and guiding them through (at least) their childhoods, until they become old enough and knowledgeable enough to survive on their own. God shows us that this is the way it should be, through the commandment to honour your parents.

I think of my own father, George — though we didn't call him that. Since his early childhood, he had a nickname "Jug". We're not sure where that came from; there were a couple of conflicting stories. One is that he was so active and mischievous that his mother likened him to a monkey in the jungle; jungle

became Jug. Or, because he played outside a lot and was always deeply tanned, he was like the title of an old song, *Little Brown Jug*. Anyway, everyone called him Jug, including me and my sister and brother. He preferred that we call him by name instead of “Dad” or “Daddy” or “Papa.”

My father, Jug, taught me a lot over the years of my childhood: how to be polite and get along with other people; a bit of mechanical knowledge, which was handy when I got my first (old) car; a love of language, reading and learning; and many other things. So by the time I was nineteen and I moved out of the family home for the first time, I was equipped to deal with the basics of life. There was never a hard-and-fast transition from childhood living with my parents to adult living on my own. My father never sat me down and said anything like, “Now, John, you’re going out on your own, and these are the things I want you to remember.” I didn’t have a sense of one era ending and another beginning; I was just moving on to the next thing. Think about your own parents, or think about your experience as parents to your children. Was there a moment or a conversation like this? How did you feel when you first moved out of your parents’ house?

Jesus was careful to prepare his disciples for what was to come, and that is what is happening in our readings for today. It’s a bit of a reverse, because it’s Jesus who is going away, and the disciples — his children — who are staying. His time with them on earth is ending, and they will have to step up and start taking responsibility for their own actions. Jesus has given them all the guidance that he can up to this point. Recall that when he first sends them out to preach the Gospel, he advises to take little or nothing with them, as their needs will be provided by those they meet: “Take nothing with you for the trip: no walking stick, no beggar’s bag, no food, no money, not even an extra shirt” (Luke 9:3). Those they meet will feed them and house them. But later, on the eve of his arrest, when he knows he will soon be leaving them, he says: “Now, whoever has a purse or a bag must take it; and whoever does not have a sword must sell his coat and buy one” (Luke 22:36). The disciples must begin to take responsibility for themselves, and prepare for the mission ahead of them. Jesus’ guidance will continue, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, but in a very different way from the face-to-face instruction they have enjoyed for the last few years. The disciples are, in many ways, now on their own.

Jesus does two very important things for them. The gift of the Holy Spirit is one, and that is a gift which keeps giving, as they say, for a lifetime. The second is that Jesus “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). I sometimes wonder what that felt like! It could be a figure of speech, simply meaning that Jesus explained the Scriptures to them; but I think there was an actual new understanding put into the disciples’ brains by Jesus. A

tremendous “Aha!” moment for them. And it does change them. In the opening chapters of the Book of Acts, we see how Peter has matured in his understanding, as he preaches to the crowd which gather on that first Pentecost. Surely that is due partly to his new understanding, and of course, the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of wisdom and understanding.

Jesus goes on to commission them as missionaries: “[In my] name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (24:47). This is what they are to do, and they begin almost immediately. They do not start their work unprepared, for they have the teaching Jesus gave them over three years; they have a good understanding of the Scriptures, and they have the Holy Spirit.

And so do we, for we are the heirs of those first disciples. We are just as prepared as they are, for we have the Gospels written down to give us Jesus’ teaching, and the same Spirit within us. Our Father looks after us well — and truly, we lack nothing in our ability to serve God and our fellow human beings. That is one of the wonderful things about our God. God asks much of us, but ensures that we have the ability to do so. It used to confuse me when I heard people praying, “Lord, help me to serve you,” or “Lord, make me truly thankful.” For in human relationships, if someone needs help with something, we don’t ask them to help us to help them; we either do it or we don’t. But our relationship with God is between one who has and knows everything, and one who has nothing and knows nothing — until God inspires us, until God grants gifts to us, we are nothing. We cannot even pray or give thanks properly without help. But with God’s help, we can even take part in God’s plans. It is a privilege and an honour to do so.

As children of human parents, we should give thanks to them for raising us and equipping us to live our own lives. Since today is Mother’s Day, it’s a good time to think about these things. And to remember the one who gives us everything — our Father in heaven. Amen.