

A company felt it was time for a shakeup and hired a new CEO. The new boss was determined to rid the company of all slackers. On a tour of the facilities, the CEO noticed a guy leaning against a wall. The room was full of workers, and he wanted to let them see that he meant business. He asked the guy, 'How much money do you make a week?' A little surprised, the young man looked at him and said, "I make about \$400 a week. Why?" The CEO said, "Wait right here."

The CEO walked back to his office, came back in 2 minutes, and handed the guy \$1600 in cash and said, "Here's 4 weeks' pay. Now GET OUT and don't come back." Feeling pretty good about what he had done, the CEO looked around the room and asked the stunned workers, "Does anyone want to tell me what that goof-ball did here?" From across the room a voice said, "He's a pizza delivery guy from DOMINO'S."

First, a little background on this feast. Spiritual truths are often realized in an intuitive, holistic way. However, they are expressed in images taken from other dimensions, especially from the cosmic and social dimensions. This is especially true for this Feast of the Ascension. We know that God is everywhere, but we use the image of heaven to show God's transcendence, which we intuitively realize. This basic cosmic positioning then borrows from the social realm the idea of a king with his court. The one who sits at the right hand of the king is closest to the king. From this special place of honor, he advises the king and oversees the affairs of the kingdom. Therefore, the risen Jesus ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, overseeing his church and our work in the world.

Even as far removed as we are from kings in the United States, we still get the point. But the ascension of Jesus also draws on another social situation. The death of an individual, especially an important one, entails a commissioning of those left behind. Their inheritance is to continue the work of the one who began it but who is no longer present to continue it. However, when this common social situation is applied to Jesus, it is changed in 2 significant ways. First, Jesus does not have a death-bed commissioning. The risen Lord sends His disciples out as an act of finishing His earthly work before ascending to the Father. Second, He is leaving and He is not leaving. He is not going to be with them in the way He was with them during His life or in His risen form. But He is going to be with them.

In Luke's telling of the story, the disciples are to wait until they have been clothed with 'power from on high.' This is the sending of the Spirit who will continue Jesus' presence among His disciples. His risen form is gone, but His and the Father's Spirit is present, doing among the disciples essentially the same work that Jesus did. (adapted from John Shea, FOLLOWING LOVE INTO MYSTERY, p. 184-185)

OK, how in the world does any of this connect to us? I believe the Ascension touches on a number of mysteries in our own lives, and here is just one of them. When I was 18 years old, like many of you, I walked out of our family home to begin life on my own. On the last night I was home, my father always gave each of us some advice, tailored to each of the 5 of us as we left. What I basically remember was "Your mother and I have given you everything we could to prepare to live your life on your own. You know our values; we hope that they will be yours. Stay close to God and follow what He asks of you." That was about it. At the time I was an anomalous mixture of cockiness and piety, and the blessing didn't mean a whole lot to me. But it was his way of blessing me.

I spent the next 9 years in seminary, and a year after I returned home, my dad died. I had seen him in those interim years, on vacations and during some of his own brief visits to the seminaries, and we talked, more deeply than ever before since he now considered me an adult and related to me in a new way. But,

unlike the time previous to me leaving home, he no longer tried to instruct and admonish me, or run an audit on my values and prayer life. What he had wanted to say to me had already been said, many times. I knew how he felt, what he thought, and what his values were. There was no need to say it again. He had given me his blessing. What had he given me? What is a blessing? What is implied in it? What is its power? Why is it important? Part of our current cultural and spiritual poverty stems from the fact that blessing each other is both a lost ritual and a lost reality. For most of us a blessing is little more than a pious goodbye, a quasi-superstitious gesture. We are poorer for the misconception.

A blessing is a way of remaining permanently present to someone. It is a way of giving someone our love, our insight, our strength, our presence, in a word, our spirit, in our physical absence. It is always based upon a prior relationship. We can only authentically bless someone we have shared something with and, the deeper and more profound the prior sharing, the deeper and more profound the blessing. Probably an example is best to understand: Imagine a mother and father raising a child. For years they try to love that child into ever fuller life, coaxing, encouraging, admonishing, trying to give their own strength, values, vision, and spirit to that child. The process is fraught with pain and setbacks, on both sides. There is the constant hopping back and forth between presence and absence, acceptance and rejection, learning and falling away, loving and hating. It is a long process. Everything needs to be said again and again, repeated, and there is the paramount need of physical presence, for the parents and the child to be together, talking, arguing, sharing, hammering things out.

However, at a point, always, the need for more words, more admonition, more physical presence stops. Symbolically, it is time for the ascension. Enough has been said. There has been enough physical presence. Symbolically put, the child is grown. This is true of all relationships, not just of those that exist between parents and a child. What is called for now is a blessing and a simultaneous backing away -- which leaves the child both free and empowered. Further words and physical presence can now be suffocating and counter-productive. Values and love have been spoken, gestured and shown sufficiently. We need to give the other our blessing, through whatever gesture or symbol we might choose. Then we need to back away, continue to live our values and love that other, and let that other be free.

This is the mystery of the ascension – and Pentecost, of letting go and imparting the spirit. Jesus Himself illustrated it. He came and He shared, but, at a point, it was enough. The child was grown. He left us with His blessing, His spirit, the Holy Spirit, is received by all who are willing to receive that blessing. Through that Spirit, Jesus is present to us in a way that is far deeper than He was ever present to His disciples when He was physically with them. Today we badly need to bless each other. The disease of our age is that nothing seems to last. Love, friendship, what we accomplish through ministry, inevitably breaks down. Given physical separation, what we have shared with each other in friendship and ministry invariably crumples and falls apart. The vision, the values, the shared spirit, in a word, the love, we have so painstakingly arrived at, crumples and we go our separate ways. Why? We haven't blessed each other. There has been no ascension and, accordingly, there can be no Pentecost. We've shared each others' physical presence, but we've never received each others' spirits for, if we had, no amount of time or distance, not even death itself, could crumple the shared vision, the shared values, the shared love. May we be a blessing to one another – for their sakes, for our sakes, and for the sake of our world. Amen. (adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 5/26/2015)