

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year B, 2009  
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Today is the last Sunday in the Easter Season, the Seventh Sunday in Easter. Now this leads us to something of a lesson in Christian theology and the making of the Church Calendar. It is interesting to recall that in the ancient Jewish world, before and during the time of our Lord, the number seven had significant theological meaning. God created the universe in seven days, according to the Old Testament. Seven, therefore, is the number of completion and the number of perfection. Because of this, seven days was the length for the important feasts, Passover and The Feast of Tabernacles, sometimes called the Feast of Booths. The Jewish New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles all occur in the seventh month. The Feast of Weeks and the Year of Jubilee were based on the square of seven. The ordination of a priest in the Hebrew cult took seven days; so did the consecration of his altar. Furnishings and decorations in the Temple were set in groups of seven. Many of us are familiar with the Menorah, the sacred Jewish candlestick. It has seven branches.

The significance of the number "seven" goes on and on among the ancient Jews. It is no wonder that it was significant among early Christians. There are seven parables in Matthew's Gospel, seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer, seven utterances of Christ from the Cross and there were seven post-resurrection appearances to, now don't guess it, seven disciples. With Pentecost, there are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. In moral theology, there are seven virtues that supplement the faith. The Early Church first chose seven deacons. In the New Testament, there were seven churches in the Roman province of Asia.

Now, I tell you this because I want you to understand that why the Church, very early in its history, decided that there would be seven Sundays in the Easter season. But, this fascination with numbers in Judaism and early Christianity created another problem. It rained for forty days and nights to create the flood that destroyed the world and gave Jonah and his ark great fame. Forty, then, is a number that carries the meaning of "a long time," but also an adequate and appropriate time. Moses lost direction in the Sinai, and it took him forty years to find the Promised Land. Jesus prayed, alone in the desert, and fasted, for forty days, during the period of his temptations after his baptism. The number forty, as I said, in relation to a period of time, hours, days, years, meant an adequate and appropriate time. People understood this. So it is no surprise that our Lord's Ascension to Heaven, which in the Bible ends his physical presence on Earth, happened forty days after the Resurrection. Therefore, the Feast of the Ascension is always the Thursday before the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Next Sunday is Pentecost, in which we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church, the fulfillment of our Lord's promise that when he was no longer physically present he would send another Advocate, the Gospel lesson from two Sundays ago.

What all this means, liturgically, is that this is sort of a "caught in the middle" Sunday. Our Lord has ascended and the Holy Spirit comes, liturgically, next week, because

liturgically, we follow the chronology of the Acts of the Apostles, not John's Gospel, in celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit. In short, liturgically, this Sunday we are "Lord-less." When the Church decided to play the numbers, this is not what the Church Fathers had in mind, and it means nothing except that it gets our attention and offers us something of a parable for understanding ourselves and how we live our Christian lives. Teachers, I'm told, say that when the teacher is away, the children will play. Do we, devoted Christians though we are, find ourselves tempted to live, from time to time, far more often, in fact than we like to admit, as if our Jesus is on vacation and we are free to act out for a few hours, or days or weeks.

I'm not going to even try to suggest all the ways that we are inconsistent in our love and faith in Jesus. Each of us knows how and when we let Jesus down, how and when we act like Jesus is missing in our lives. We would not be here, today, if we were not believers. We would not be here, today, if we did not hope with all that is in us that Jesus is truly our Redeemer. Most of us, have at least on one and probably many occasions, offered our sins and our broken souls at the foot of the Cross, because Jesus is our one and only hope.

We know that the numbers game aside, Jesus never goes away, God never turns his back on us. God, in Christ, is always there, to lift us, to comfort us and forgive and redeem us. Why? Because, God loves us. It is as simple as that. And reciprocal love, that is our love of God in return, means that we should live our lives in such away that we do not give the impression that we are turning our backs on God. A loving relationship is a consistent relationship and a devoted relationship. Love can not go on vacation.

This liturgically strange Sunday serves good purpose if it does nothing more than remind us of this. Our God is with us always. Our God hopes that we will remember this, each and every day, in each and every situation as we go about our business of making our way in his world. *Amen.*