

The Withdrawal of God

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Acts 1:6-11; John 17:1-6, 9-11a

On this Memorial Day weekend, as our thoughts turn toward those who made the ultimate sacrifice, I was touched by a remembrance penned by a member of our church.

She grew up as the daughter of an orange grower down in Florida. And every Saturday night, her father polished his cordovan work boots in preparation for church the next morning.

So, at the age of 12, when she hears Walter Cronkite mention “boots on the ground” in Vietnam, she thinks of her daddy. Beyond her love of the madcap war sitcom, *Hogan’s Heroes*, her daddy’s cordovan boots are about the only connection she can muster as the storied newscaster drones on and on about the Tet offensive and the Viet Cong.

Then, as the evening news broadcast draws to the close, a list scrolls by.

“What are casualties?” the bemused daughter asks her father.

“Those wounded or killed in action.”

The room spins. “But that says 543. You mean so far? For the whole war?”

“No,” her father answers, “that’s for the week.”

Still unable to absorb the number, she asks, “You mean for both sides?”

No, her father tells her—that’s just American casualties.

“Boots on the ground.” Her daddy’s boots, her brother’s boots, and all those dead and dying. She can’t believe what she just saw and heard.

In anguish, the twelve-year-old runs upstairs to her room, slams the door, and throws herself on the bed. “Anger and shame wash over me,” she writes. “Am I mad at myself for not understanding or at my father for watching so casually as the list of casualties scroll by? How could Walter put those numbers up there each night, so casually, like they were numbers and not young men? Dead young men.”

“I am no longer news material, and I will never sit on the blue carpet next to my father’s cordovan boots and watch Walter and the scrolling list of casualties again.”

Those with no personal experience of war, whether as a combatant or as a victim, are most prone to romanticize it. But starting with the television reporting of Vietnam--and more so now with the internet--it’s hard to keep war at a safe and glorious distance. Almost daily, the carnage and killing of the War on Terror—or Terror’s War on *Us*—comes careening into our family rooms.

This week it was the horrific bombing in Manchester that killed nearly two dozen women and children, while in an Egyptian desert, twenty-eight Coptic Christians were forced from their bus and gunned down by hate-filled zealots. Such atrocities and countless more, known to God but missed on the evening news, leave us crying with the Psalmist, “How long, O Lord? How long? Will you forget [us] forever?” (Psalm 13:1). But Jesus just climbs on that cloud and rides it into heaven leaving this troubled world in our not-so-able hands.

Today is Ascension Sunday—that Sunday of the year when the church remembers a radical shift in God’s engagement with the world. Jesus preaches and lives his message, is cruelly crucified, and then strides from the tomb with the life and love of God beating triumphantly within him. Then after dropping in on his disciples for a day or so, according to the Gospels—or forty

days, according to the book of Acts—Jesus gathers the awestruck faithful on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

Somebody asks the question on everybody's mind: "Lord, will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?" meaning, "Will you now bring the final deliverance we've been waiting for?"

But Jesus answers with an artful dodge that amounts to "No." He tells them it is their job to be witnesses to his kingdom in the power of the Holy Spirit while he takes a prolonged and well-deserved vacation back home with God. Then, clothed in the biblical imagery of clouds and ascent, Jesus makes his exit.

For a few dumbstruck moments, the disciples gape after him. Then two men clothed in white—probably Elijah and Moses, who showed up the last time Jesus got lost in the clouds up on the Mount of Transfiguration—lower the boom: "What are you staring at? He meant what he said. Now get on with the business he left you to do."

And there they are, and there we are, confronted with what feels like the withdrawal of God.

Now at first blush, this hardly seems like the good news the gospel is supposed to be. This seems like the worst possible bad news. If God's kingdom is to be restored in this broken world of ours, it will not be through divine slight of hand. No, this will only happen, says Jesus, if those who claim to love and follow him, actually do.

In Jesus' longest prayer in the New Testament, recorded in the 17th chapter of John, he prays, "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world." And "As you have sent me . . . so I have sent them."

It sounds like Jesus thinks a lot more of us than we ever dared think or imagine of ourselves.

But what if the good news squirreled away in what feels like the bad news of the Ascension is that it provides us the distance we need to be free? I mean, if God were as

immediately, tangibly present everywhere as we think we want God to be, there would be no room left for us. Instead, our faith would be compelled by the overwhelming presence and majesty of God. As it is, the God who draws near in Jesus always keeps a discreet distance, allowing us room to dismiss or ignore God, if we choose.

One of my best and most beloved mentors was Ed Friedman, a rabbi and family therapist. Ed taught me much of what I know about pastoral ministry. I bumped into him the other night at *Barnes and Noble* where his book, *Failure of Nerve*, called to me, unbidden, from a shelf--a single, solitary volume--as though it were left there just for me.

Sadly, Ed died much too young twenty years ago. But one of the things he taught me was that according to rabbinic tradition, at creation, God contracted or withdrew into God's self, just enough to allow the world room to be.

We see something of the same phenomenon in good parenting. Like Stephen and Lindsey, dedicating Owen and Sophie today, the best parents pray and work and strive to treat parenting as the holy vocation it is. But the goal of all this joy and effort and anguish is to raise a child, sufficiently fearless and free, so that he or she can eventually leave home and make it on their own.

So maybe as Jesus rides heavenward on that cloud, it is not with a sense of relief or even, "Good riddance!." Maybe like a momma at her baby's kindergarten or high school or college graduation, he holds a tear-sodden Kleenex in his hand. Maybe he'd like nothing more than to stick around and solve the world's problems--and yours and mine too--in a single, divine fell swoop.

But he loves his own too much to undermine their initiative and capacity and chance to matter. So he prays his heart out for them. Then he lets them go.

Of course, it's not like he's done with them altogether any more than parenting is over when a child turns eighteen. I recently heard a comment attributed to Jeanette Bowman, a charter

member of our church, now in God's nearer presence. Dear Miss Jeanette confessed about her own struggle with motherhood, "I got pregnant fifty years ago . . . and I'm *still* not over it!"

Even so, after the Ascension, while Jesus' relationship with his disciples shifts, it doesn't end. He promises to show up in the unseen but deeply felt presence of the Holy Spirit. And he tells them to form a community where he will come calling in his word and in their love for one another. "Sanctify them in your truth," he prays. "Your word is truth." And then, "[Grant] that the love with which you have loved me may be in them."

And as Jesus peers into the future, what is the focus of his prayers for the world? Ironically enough, his prayers for the world come down to a prayer for his church. This sounds strange, even naive, to our post-modern ears, as we live in an age when the church is ever more pushed to the margins of society. Sometimes, it seems the church is on life support. It's just a matter of time till the 'ole gal expires altogether.

If so, that is news to Jesus. Yes, the church is changing. Yes, the forms it takes in the future may be very different from what we have known in the past. But Jesus seems to be banking everything on the hope and promise of a people in every place and time who will somehow, somewhere, bear witness to him. And in bearing witness to him, point the world to its true destiny as the birthplace and home-place of the children of God.

Some of us saw this in a small way in a God-thing that happened at the end-of-year banquet for our cub scout pack, a thriving group of over thirty boys and their families of varying races and ethnicities. A family of Arab descent—who chose Knollwood because their cub's graduation from Bolton elementary was held here, and they knew and trusted us—wanted to send their cub to summer camp. But finances were tight and they weren't sure they could pay the full cost.

During that same banquet, one of our pack leaders was approached by a family friend of a special needs boy who had found a ready welcome among our KBC cubs. She was so moved by

the welcome this boy received that she asked if there might be a child who needed help going to camp this summer. Upon learning there was, she went to an ATM and came back with the needed cash, leaving our pack leader to reflect in wonderment, “It was pretty profound to have both the need told to me at the banquet and a person step forward to cover the costs within twenty minutes.” Maybe the God who keeps sneaking up on us in Jesus, is not so distant as it seems.

Or what of the recent softball game in which our team—playing for fun, not athletic distinction—was trounced by a team from a local business. The next game played in their double-header was with a local church team. Upon realizing that our team was seriously out-matched by theirs, this local fellowship of believers adjusted their level of play to make it more fun for everyone. They took to deliberately walking batters who lacked proficiency at the plate, and even invited our team to practice with them in the off season. Afterwards, one of our players observed, “The only negative about playing softball this spring (other than the fly balls I've dropped and the weak grounders I've hit) has been the occasional over-eager wannabe Bobby Cox we've faced . . . Beyond that, it's been a blast, but playing against a team that was more interested in fun and fellowship was a particular treat.” Who'd have thought when Jesus prayed for his folks to manifest a oneness woven from his love, he'd have been talking about softball?!

Or what of last Sunday around 2 pm when in our newly commissioned Wellness and Community Center, nearly one hundred people of every size and description—tall, short, slim and not-so-slim, young/old, male/female, black, white, and brown—were playing and frolicking and laughing together on a sanctified basketball court. To me, this was a thrilling and undeniable Kingdom of God moment.

And who knows? Maybe it never would have happened had Jesus crowded us and not left us room to be creative, compassionate, and free in his name.

Granted, these are little things. In a world of violence and war and terror, they may not seem like much.

But in truth, we're not capable of solving all the world's problems. What we *can* do is bear faithful witness to the only one who can.

So until as the angelic messengers promised—"Jesus returns in the same way you have seen him go"—let's proclaim his Lordship and life in this ministry and mission we share. After all, in one of the greatest expression of his love, he left us room to matter. And in his name and spirit, that is what we aim to do.

Even so, come Lord Jesus: now in our faithfulness and someday, in your fullness. Amen.

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