

“When the Training Wheels Come Off”

Sermon: Year B, Ascension Sunday

Texts: Luke 24:44–53, Acts 1:1–11

Preached: May 13, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

All praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, lifted high above all things. Come and speak to us. AMEN

I was straightening up in the garage yesterday and saw my bicycle staring at me. It has been a couple of years since I’ve gotten on it, given my knee woes. I remembered when Tom and I went to pick it out. It turned out that I had never owned a bicycle that was the right size for my long legs. Who knew? The owner picked one out for me to try out. It already looked impossibly tall, and then he raised the seat to what I thought was a ridiculous height, and told me to try it out on the parking lot. I struggled to lift my leg high enough to hop on. It had been awhile since I had ridden, and as I tried to position myself on the bike I wobbled across the parking lot as though I had never been on a bicycle. I heard Tom cackling and asking the owner, “Does it come with training wheels?” I bought it anyway.

How many of you remember learning to ride a bicycle? I flashed back to my experience recently. I had seen an old photo of the church where my dad was pastor when I was a small child. It was made up of two separate buildings, with a long sidewalk between them. Well, it seemed like a long sidewalk at the time. It was on that sidewalk that I learned to ride a bike. I still remember it. I started off with training wheels, riding back and forth, back and forth, on that smooth concrete path for days, becoming more and more confident. My feet would travel around with the pedals, though I’m pretty sure that sometimes they were just going along for the ride as my father propelled the bicycle forward. At some point I began to push them myself, though, steadied by the training wheels.

Finally it was time to take the training wheels off. I remember the feeling of anxiety and apprehension as my father wielded the wrench. I pleaded with him to leave them on, but he insisted that it was time, that I was a big boy now, and that I could do it. With fear and trembling I mounted the bike, my dad’s hand steadying me. I wish on this Mother’s Day that I could say it was my mom, but my mom has never been one to run alongside anything, so she stood at the other end of the sidewalk. My dad urged me to push down on the pedals, and assured me that he would hold on so I wouldn’t fall. I pedaled tentatively, handlebars wobbling, but he kept reminding me that he was holding on to the bike, as he trotted alongside me. I fixed my eyes on my mom, measuring the distance, tongue sticking out as I concentrated on staying upright, wanting so badly to be able to ride. We did that several times, and I began to relax. This was kind of fun.

And then, suddenly, I became aware that my dad had pulled his hand away, and I was riding on my own. I nervously clinched the handgrips, staring fixedly at my mom as my dad continued to run alongside, afraid to look around me for fear I would fall. I have a vague memory of almost running into my mother, since we hadn’t adequately practiced the whole braking thing, and I know that I fell several times in subsequent efforts. In a short time, despite my bruises and scrapes, I had found my balance, and could enjoy the speed. I was riding. But then my parents told me it was time to get off the sidewalk and ride over to my friends’ houses. Aaaaahhh!!! But that meant having to turn! I wanted to keep riding back and forth on the straight sidewalk. It took awhile before I discovered the freedom of gliding along the street, looking at the world around me in a new way as I raced past it, taking it all in, heading somewhere.

Today’s stories about the ascension of Jesus in some ways remind me of that experience. The disciples gathered there had been following Jesus around for three years, listening to him teach, watching him heal the sick and feed the hungry, seeing the power of God in him working wonders in their world...but they were not really convinced that they could do the same, even though he kept telling them that they would have access to that same power. It was as though they were going through a training wheel phase. And they certainly did not want those training wheels removed. But the wheels came off in spite of their worries and fears. Jesus kept telling them that they wouldn’t have his bodily presence with them much longer, but he assured them that there would come the steadying hand in the person of the Holy Spirit, the one who would come alongside them. That’s actually how the Holy Spirit is named in scripture sometimes: Paraclete, *parakletos*, the one who is “called alongside” us.

And as the risen Jesus prepares to take his leave of them, he places before his followers, his friends, a task that they're not sure they can perform: he tells them that they are to go out into all the world around them and to boldly testify to all the things that they have seen and heard, all the things they have learned from Jesus, all the things they have experienced about the in-breaking Reign of God that have made their hearts burn within them, to begin to do the things they've only wished they could do. They are to go out to heal and feed and speak with authority to rebuke the powers of evil they encountered in the world, the things that oppressed and shattered the lives of their neighbors. They were to go out with Good News.

The anxiety must have been rising. "How can we testify about you to people who hate us? How can we do acts of amazing power without you here?" And then Jesus departs from them, after promising that the Holy Spirit will be the steadying hand as they wobble out into the world. As Jesus disappears from their sight, they continue to stare fixedly after him, as fixedly as I stared at my mom. And then those two men in dazzling clothing speak, and draw their attention back to earth. "People, why are you standing here staring up into heaven? Jesus isn't gone from you forever. He's going to come back to you, will continue to run alongside you, but in a new way." So, stop fixating on heaven. Look to earth. Keep your eyes on the track. Start pedaling! The Holy Spirit who is going to come upon you, that same power that you experienced in Christ Jesus, is going to be the steadying hand, will be the one who teaches you to balance, the one who teaches you to ride confidently through this world.

So often we feel powerless, fearful, convinced we're going to crash, convinced we can't make it, that we can't do the things God is calling us to do. We worry that we might be riding all alone, that we're unprepared, wobbling, unsteady, uncertain of what we're supposed to do now, and we most assuredly don't want God to pull the training wheels off. "Please God, just let me ride along comfortably, with no effort, not having to make any decisions, not having to act, not having to change anything at all in how I'm getting on from day to day. Let my feet just ride around on the pedals as you push." We don't trust the power that God offers to us through the Spirit. We plead with God to have nothing change. "God, please let me stay right here on this familiar piece of straight sidewalk where I don't have to make any turns, because turns are scary." We fear the unknown, we fear what might happen if we ourselves have to act under the power of the Spirit.

A problem for most of us is that often we want to hold onto the Jesus of history, the comfortable, reassuring Jesus. We want to keep staring at that, that which doesn't seem to change, not having to wrestle with what that means for dealing with the world as it is right now. We're reluctant to acknowledge that God doesn't let us stay in one place. I saw a funny meme on Facebook the other day. It had a bold caption at the top that says, "God: I have a plan for your life." And then it said, "What it feels like:," and there's a photo of a little boy and his big sister in a roller coaster car. The little boy, who is labeled "you" has a look of absolute terror on his face. He is clutching desperately the hand of his sister, who is labeled "Holy Spirit." And she is laughing in absolute delight. While we have to be careful about thinking that every aspect of our lives has been predetermined by God, I think there's a lot of truth in the metaphor. Life is a wild ride, sometimes scary, sometimes exhilarating, but always the Spirit is there beside us.

We're often afraid to ask for the Spirit's power in our lives, that power that enables us to roll confidently and boldly through our world, acting with the Spirit's power to change the world, to change ourselves, to speak to our family and friends and neighbors about all that we've seen and heard. But to experience that reassuring power, that steadying hand that guides us to balance and confidence, we need to ask for it. We have to remind one another that the Spirit is guiding and watching and helping. By praying, meditating, hearing the Word, and communing with Christ and with one another, we gain access to the power of the Spirit. We need to deepen our experience with God's Spirit, that Spirit given to us in our baptism, that Spirit who breathes into us and through us, inviting the Spirit to run alongside us. That happens most readily when we ask for it, when we seek to know the power in new ways, when we consciously open ourselves to the Spirit's working in new ways in our lives, even though that means change, even though that means acting in new ways in order that we can see the world around us as God sees it. That prayer for the Spirit to come alongside to strengthen, to support, to guide, to empower and free is the prayer that we should start every day with. Keep pedaling. There's adventure out there! AMEN