

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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This coming week will be the graduation ceremony for the 8th graders of St. Pascal Baylon school, and a few days ago several of them asked me to sign their yearbooks. There's always a little bit of wistfulness in doing that—mixed in with sharing in their joy and success. Every grade level in our school has a class picture in the book, but the 8th graders are special, because I know it is possible that I may never see some of them again for the rest of our lives. Some are not parishioners and some just don't come to church. It's kind of a profound moment to know that you are expressing a farewell for the last time. They will always know where and how to find me if they want to, but many of them won't. There just won't be any reason to do that.

In a closet in my home I have amassed a collection of roughly 25 yearbooks from all the places I have studied and taught over the years. Many of their cover pages are filled with written sentiments like, "I hope we never lose touch," or "Let's be friends always." In the vast majority of cases, I have completely lost touch, and some of them I struggle to remember why I knew them at all. It's not that anybody was being insincere in their messages. It's just that we often weren't really able to appreciate yet how easy it is to become separated as life moves on. In fact, if you want to sustain a relationship, you really have to work at it—it has to be just that important.

Today in the Church, we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord, a transforming moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples. And there is a great irony in our hearing from the Gospel of Matthew today. These are the very last words of that gospel, and there's nothing reported about any ascension at all. In fact, it is just the opposite: Jesus ends by saying, "I am with you always, until the end of the age." The End.

He's not going anywhere. But the disciples are. At his command, they are told to go out to go out to every nation, to teach and preach and baptize. They are the ones who need to leave, to graduate, and to get on with the purpose of their lives. And for that reason, they will never see him in bodily form again. But like our 8th grade graduates, like all those writings in the yearbooks, they will always know how to find him, to remain friends always, if that's what they really want. But they will have to make that desire a priority, to work at it, if it's truly important. At the conclusion of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is not in the clouds, far away. He's on solid, earthly ground, on a mountain in Galilee, where they had first come to know him in the beginning.

But if Jesus and his friends are now to be separated by distance and time, how can it be that a strong, loving relationship can be maintained? The answer is simple: Holy Spirit. Alive and indwelling our hearts, our church, our world, and especially our Eucharist. No, it's not the same thing as being able to point to the man from Nazareth sitting in a pew over there in the corner. But his presence is every bit as real and here and now. But we are the ones who have to make the effort to discover that, lest we become separated. Our desire for lasting friendship with God cannot be just some kind sentiment in a yearbook. It must be engaged, day-by-day, year-by-year, or we will never see him again.

It's relatively easier for people to believe in a Lord who is far away, beyond the skies. And in one sense that's true. But it's a lot more demanding on us to put faith in the Lord who is *here*, right where he said he'd be—always. It's harder to see that, unless we make the effort. In the first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles, the two men dressed in white urged the first disciples to that same kind of confidence: "Men of Galilee, why are you standing around staring at the sky in order to see your Lord? He's *here*, rushing around you in the form of the Holy Spirit."

And as always, we make our most important efforts to maintain that friendship when we decide to be present and active in our celebration of Eucharist—hearing the stories of faith, offering our gifts, being fed at this sacred table, rededicating ourselves to service in the world. We have been told where, when and how Jesus can always be rediscovered for sure. It's here.

Think of all the friends whom you have left behind over the years, not because you intended to or wanted to, but just because they ceased being important enough after your last physical contact with them. That can't happen with Jesus unless that is our choice. "I am with you always," he said, "Even until the end of the age." Or to put it in yearbook language, "I hope we will always be friends, even after you don't see me every day." We can be. The answer is Holy Spirit. The answer is Eucharist.