

Feast of the Ascension
Acts 1:1-11
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
May 1, 2008
The Rev. John Spicer

Boundary Crossings

Tonight, I'd like to talk with you about something very important: the altar rail. (By the way, this *will* have something to do with the Ascension, don't worry.)

You might well have never thought much about altar rails. They're nicely functional, giving us something to lean against when we kneel to receive Communion. If you have bad knees and then go to a church designed *without* altar rails, you soon realize, when you try to get up, what a blessing those rails can be. But originally, they served a very different function. Rails were added as the boundary of the sanctuary, the space where the altar is, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, in order to keep stray dogs from wandering into the holiest space in the church building.¹ The fact that these little fences now keep *us* on this side of that holy space may say something about us that we don't really want to hear.

As a kid, growing up in a traditional Episcopal church, I very clearly got the message that normal folks like me were not supposed to be within that space, the sanctuary. Only particular people, the clergy and the acolytes and the altar guild, were allowed to go in there. It wasn't a matter of exclusion or an implication that we normal people weren't good enough; it was just that this space wasn't quite like all the rest of the space in the church. And when I became an acolyte, I knew I had come into a role that entailed great responsibility simply because I was allowed to open that gate and pass through the altar rail, into God's sanctuary.

As I said, some churches are now designed with the sanctuary being open, with no altar rails separating the sanctuary from the rest of the worship space. For those of us who err on the side of wanting to break down divisions between ordained people and lay people and who want the church to be welcoming to everyone, it's tempting to assume this is a step forward – after all, no barrier should separate us from the table around which we gather as the family of God!

But there is something more to these rails than might meet the eye. At a recent seminar, the author Diana Butler Bass told the story of a congregation in conflict over the prospect of removing its altar rails. It turns out that the people who wanted to keep them weren't just worshippers of tradition. Instead, they realized the rails helped them worship God. They understood that they needed something to differentiate the space where God became physically present to them in the Eucharist.²

And there we have the mystery that this short rail represents. The relationship between the sanctuary and the rest of the church is a sacramental embodiment of the relationship between heaven and earth. The English bishop and scholar N.T. Wright puts it this way: Although they are different, heaven and earth are merely different dimensions of a single reality, God's creation. And these two dimensions of God's creation intermingle and interrelate. As Wright says, "God's space and ours – heaven and earth, in other words – are, though very different, not far away from one another. ... They interlock and intersect in a whole variety of ways even while they retain, for the moment at least, their separate and distinct identities and roles."³ Despite its otherness, heaven is also very close by; and like the altar rail, the boundary between

heaven and earth is permeable. It's really not intended to keep us out but to let us know there's something different on the other side.

And just what does all this have to do with the Feast of the Ascension that we're celebrating tonight? I think understanding heaven this way makes the doctrine of the Ascension a little easier to wrap our heads around. What we're celebrating tonight is the reality that Christ has returned to the Godhead and rejoined the Father and the Holy Spirit *with his incarnate human nature fully in place*. Through the Ascension, Christ brings humanity into divinity. He returns into the heavenly dimension for two purposes: to serve as Lord and ruler, exercising authority over heaven and earth; and also to be our intercessor before the Father, giving us access to the throne of grace by bringing human nature into the conversation of the Godhead, so to speak. Incarnation doesn't just mean the son of God being born in a stable; it means that Jesus Christ is both human and divine *right now* too, bringing humanity into the divine relationship of the Trinity just as he brought divinity into the human relationships we share.

Now, as the reading from Acts describes for us, when Jesus departs for heaven, he is clearly going somewhere different from where the apostles remain, their jaws dropping in amazement. Jesus leaves them – but he doesn't *exactly* leave them. He promises them that the power of the Holy Spirit will soon propel them into the world as his witnesses. And by the same token, the fact that Jesus has passed into the heavenly dimension doesn't mean he's abandoned us. Instead, like the apostles, we are able to connect with Jesus at all times and places through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus can be both with us and not with us because of this mysterious parallel proximity of earth and heaven. Jesus told his followers about this while he was still with them, several times, in fact: “The kingdom of God is among you,” he said (Luke 17:21). “The kingdom of heaven has come near,” he said (Matthew 10:7). “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). He is with us, but at the same time he's in a different dimension of creation, one we access only with great intentionality and deep reverence.

And the way we do that, primarily, is by approaching this sanctuary and asking Jesus to be present with us again, in body and in Spirit, through the Eucharist. Each time we gather and offer our prayers of active remembering, we encounter God through that permeable boundary, through a thin place, between heaven and earth. Jesus is away from us, in the sense of his incarnate, physical self having been taken into the heavenly dimension of God's reality. But from that other realm, he can be immediately present to us through the Spirit every time we remember him, every time we invite him to come back among us again, at the altar.

So, when we come to the rail and put out our hands across that boundary between earth and heaven to receive the bread and cup, what do we take back into ourselves? We receive a “foretaste of the heavenly banquet,” a feast we share with all the saints and angels in heaven. We take into ourselves a taste of the reign of God. We take into ourselves God's intimate presence, filling us with power and embracing us with love. We take into ourselves God's desire that we would be in right relationship with God and each other, forgiving one another and ourselves, reveling in God's *shalom*, God's own peace. We take into ourselves the assurance that Christ will be there each and every time we ask, even to the end of the age, regardless of our success or failure at getting things right. We take into ourselves God's desire that all of God's children would be one, gathered around one table, living as one heavenly family in the world. We take into ourselves the pattern of God's justice for creation – that everyone must be welcome, that everyone must be provided for, and that everyone must get enough to eat. When we come to this rail and put out our hands, we are so much closer to heaven than we probably ever imagine.

And then, having crossed the boundary between earth and heaven, we are sent out into the world as Christ's apostles, sent as witnesses of everything I've just mentioned – witnesses of God's presence, witnesses of reconciliation, witnesses of unity, witnesses of justice, witnesses of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over everything else we know. We say it ourselves in our prayer after Communion: "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ, our Lord" (BCP 366).

Those last two words are maybe the most important. The Ascension matters because it means that Jesus really is *Lord* over all creation. And if that's true, then the way we witness live in the world must foreshadow the story's ending, just as Communion offers a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. In the fullness of time, Christ will come back into our earthly dimension once again, making all things new, bringing with him a new heaven and a new earth joined as paradise once again (Revelation 21:1-22:7). So in our lives now, we must open windows onto that heavenly kingdom for others, giving the world around us glimpses of God's reign – glimpses of divine presence, glimpses of reconciled relationships, glimpses of justice, glimpses of true peace. And so, may we truly own the prayer we will say tonight once we've crossed that boundary into heaven once again: "Father, send us out ... to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ, our Lord." Amen.

1. Pocknee, C.E., and D.W. Randall. "Altar Rails." In *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*. J.G. Davies, ed. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986.
2. Bass, Diana Butler. Presentation for the annual Blandy Lectures, Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, TX. Sept. 25, 2007.
3. Wright, N.T. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York: HarperOne, 2008. 116.