

At-One-Ment  
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The Quill ran an article a few days back about the language of texting, lots of the initials that stand for things our kids might not want parents to be able to read when we glance over their shoulders.... Even I've picked up things like LOL and BFF and BTW – that's just the tip to the texting iceberg – and lots of them aren't that innocent. Texting is generating lots of shorthand and shortcuts. We shouldn't be surprised – all our professions do it – alphabet soup things that mean something only to those in the field. When my former Presbytery got an Interim Exec, he made us put a quarter in a jar whenever we church-types used our own lingo. Of course we loved catching one another – and eventually we all went out to the Chinese buffet on our collection of quarters. It was an eye-opener to realize how much church-speak we'd all fallen into. Committee initials, government programs, data stuff - it's a useful shorthand but it does shut out others who aren't in the know. So I'm not shy when folks at other meetings throw around acronyms – I say, “Now what's that mean?”

As an aside, folks who have studied friendly and welcoming congregations have remarked that congregations fall into patterns and lingo that can make visitors feel like outsiders. In a former church, I had some folks from another church come and visit our service, and not things for us. It was eye-opening. Even before they came inside, there were a couple stoppers – where it was OK to park, and what door to come in. They came in at the end of the building farthest from the sanctuary, and wandered in the halls for a while before they found it. No signs, no one assisting them. People looked like they all knew where they were going already. During the service, as we switched between 2 hymnals, they were sometimes looking in the wrong one and the numbers didn't match what we were singing. They said “trespasses” in the Lord's Prayer and were the only ones, but there hadn't been a note to warn them. The Gloria we sang was different from the one they knew, and there wasn't a page number for it. Then they were flustered at the Passing of the Peace when folks walked all over hugging each other – folks did greet them warmly, but they didn't know what to do. You get the idea – even when we are church goers already, a new church has new habits to learn and new ways of doing things. Imagine if we weren't already church-goers, how confusing things might be, even if we think we are the friendliest group around.

A fancy church word theology folks throw around is the word “atonement” – it has to do with the idea that the death of Christ “atoned for,” or made up for our sins before God. And since Christ was raised, this forgiveness, in theological terms, was “effective”; that is, accepted by God for us. As you can probably tell from the sermon title, I like to play with words: and some years ago I heard a preacher break this fancy theological word down into syllables so that it could be pronounced, “at-one-ment,” which is cool because that’s what happens when we come to God now since Jesus Christ died and was raised – we are made one, joined into the same fellowship that Jesus shares with who he calls the Father and the Spirit. We call God the Trinity – traditionally named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, sometimes named as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, or some other three-fold naming that evokes the idea of a different experiences or expressions of our One God. Christians have seen the Trinitarian God as an example of equal, non-hierarchical relationship, and see in Jesus’ prayer here in John 17 as asking that all believers be drawn into that same close relationship and communion, that same sharing of unity and oneness. At-one-ment. Not just that we are forgiven and set on our merry way; more like we are restored into the lost unity of oneness with our God; we are drawn into that liquid, relational, flowing communion between the ways God is – the “persons” of God, in yet another theological word. In other places, Jesus calls us “no longer servants, but friends;” and in another place refers to us as brought into the family as sons & daughters, heirs, and surprisingly, like he is.

When I think about this, I can easily go into the rather mystical side, a swirling of oneness and unity and co-creators and ambassadors and a blurring of boundaries between us and God, as God fills us, as we are transformed into the image of Christ, as we are brought into the new creation of which Christ is the first. I am overwhelmed that Jesus could (a) pray for us and let us hear it; and (b) tell us we are brought into oneness with the God of all. Part of me could get lost in enjoying the mystery.

Then the practical side says, “So what does it mean about life on earth?” Reading about Ascension Sunday, which the church celebrates on this Sunday just before we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, I was struck by the comments in a study resource I use – that Jesus, knowing we are all at-one-ment, was OK about ascending back to heaven and leaving things in our hands – connected, as we are, through God’s Spirit. The part of God that was incarnated in flesh as we are can return to the wholeness of God, with the very spirit of God uniting us, making us the flesh of God for the future. It’s a bold and trusting move – kinda risky,

if you ask me, depending on us to carry on with the plan, depending on our actually learning from and leaning on and listening to the spirit. Like Jesus' parables about the landowner who goes off and trusts things in the hands of his people, like Jesus' other parables about folks being entrusted with various talents to use – God now chooses to work through we who believe, who are made new creations through Jesus, who are born from above and gifted with the Spirit, who are joined into God's creative work through being reunited with God.

Ascension invites us to claim and live out our vocation as God's partners in transforming the world and the faith we affirm. In the Acts version, an angel asks the disciples who have just seen the resurrected Jesus ascend into heaven, "Why are you standing here looking up into heaven?" In other words, "Get your eyes back down on the earth level, on the life level, and get to it." THIS is our time, THIS is our context, THIS is our place of service, THIS is where God has placed us to live and serve, THIS is what we've been called to. THIS is what the Spirit gifts and fills us for, THIS is our Great Work, THIS is why we are joined to God.