

Pentecost 1A 2017  
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I'm not sure if school English departments teach the five-paragraph essay model anymore. Some of you who are in my generation might remember that it was the writing tool of choice for seniors in High School to prepare students for all the papers they'd be expected to write in college. The form is simple: in the first paragraph, make a claim and give three examples to prove your point. The next three paragraphs are the expansion of the three examples you hope will back up your initial claim. And then the fifth paragraph is supposed to wrap up the argument and perhaps make some suggestions for what has changed since you proved your point. Every kid in my high school practiced this form to death, and I still find myself using it sometimes in emails or, frankly, sermons.

The first four paragraphs are pretty straight forward—a thesis plus three supports. It's the concluding paragraph that really gets students confused. I had great English teachers, and I remember a wise teacher circled one of my concluding paragraphs and wrote in capital letters next to it, "SO WHAT?" It took me a few years of writing in college before I quite understood what she was talking about. I realized it's pretty easy to get an essay off the ground. It's much harder to get it landed. I think in writing "so what" on my paper, my teacher was trying to say that anyone can make a few good points. The real art is figuring out what are the implications of the points you just made. Or, more succinctly, so what? You've just spent several hundred words proving that Elizabeth Bennett has been in love with Mr. Darcy from page 24 of *Pride and Prejudice*. So what? Why does it matter in this world that you've just written what you've written? If you can answer that, your essay will really shine. English lesson over.

That bracing question "so what" came to me strongly when I was reading today's very short Gospel lesson. These last 50 days of Easter and then the Feast of Pentecost have brought us powerful stories of the teachings, the passion, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus. We've heard about the winds and fire of the Holy Spirit coming down on the apostles as they were empowered to teach and to preach the Good News of healing to a broken world. The disciples have had these singular experiences of how God works through the person of Jesus and have been enlivened by the Holy Spirit. And they were changed forever. Now comes the time to figure out what comes next. Or, put a better way, so what?

The Sundays between now and Advent will be a retrospective set of Gospel stories highlighting the most important teachings that Jesus gave the disciples. We will move together through the parables, and we will refresh ourselves with the teachings of Jesus. We'll learn about the loaves and fishes, the vine and branches, the prostitutes and the tax collectors. We'll be reminded of the core stories of our Christian faith.

At some point, of course, we'll have to figure out our concluding paragraph. We'll have to figure out the implications of all of these stories.

We are baptized with water and the holy spirit. We are fed with the food made holy by Christ. Our sins are forgiven, and we are blessed each Sunday in this place. Not to put too fine a point on it, but so what? How do these things impact your life as you move through the world? And how does your being a Christian impact the world around you? What, specifically, changes around you when Jesus works through you? Two thousand years of disciples have wrestled with these stories of Jesus, and now it's our turn to do the same.

I would go as far as to say that Jesus is trying to give us our concluding paragraph in the text of today's Gospel. Jesus gives a very short answer to the disciples when they try to figure out what's next. He says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Get out. Teach. Heal. Preach. Serve. Tell the story of this man from Galilee who is God with us, sent to heal a sometimes-shattered world. I present to you the radical notion that you are all disciples of Jesus. They are not just some band of 11 men from long-ago times, wearing sandals, and providing comic relief in the Gospels. They are you, and they are me. The disciples held no more nor less faith than you. They exercised no more nor less power than you. They were no more nor less intelligent nor faithful than you or me. Jesus chose them to get out into the world to make a change, and you are likewise called. They weren't magic. But they did ultimately figure out the answer to the "so what" of our faith. Get out there and be little Christs for this tricky world. And while you're working out the "so what" of your faith, remember Jesus doesn't send us out alone. Jesus sends us with each other and with these words of comfort and solidarity: Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Find the "so what." End your essay with a bang. Amen.