

Tom Woodward lived next door when I was in seventh grade. He played basketball on the Beaverton High School team. I was a big basketball fan and I wanted to play high school basketball someday, so Tom seemed like a hero, a bit larger than life, not only because he played basketball, but because he was a good guy and was genuinely kind to me, a lowly junior high school student.

Almost every day Tom and his high school friends would play basketball in his drive way right beside my front steps. As I went in and out of the house I would watch them, wishing I could play with them – perhaps lingering a little, fishing for an invitation. Then one day Tom did ask if I would like to play. I was shocked, but hurried over before his friends could object. They may not have been thrilled at the thought of including me. I was tall for my age, but I wasn't really good enough to be playing with them – except that I was! There I was playing with those guys on the Beaverton High team!

Tom asked me to play again the next day (No surprise that I just happened to be on my front steps the next day). With Tom's sponsorship, as it were, I was eventually accepted by them. And that was all I asked. Do you know how unusual and wonderful it is for a junior high school kid to be accepted by seventeen and eighteen year olds? Looking back, I'm still surprised by Tom's generous action. We moved to Seattle later that spring and I've never seen him since. I don't think my father slipped him money. I believe it was an act of charity. He gave me the unusual, but intoxicating experience of truly belonging in that group even though I did not deserve to be there on my own merits. For a thirteen year-old basketball fan it was a close approximation to heaven.

Have you ever had the experience of one person's charity being the gateway, or key, into a group or place you would have had no other way of entering? Such an experience of being made to feel at home in a new and marvelous environment can help us to grasp the mystery of the Ascension, the feast we celebrate today, for that was what Christ did for us when He introduced and welcomed our own human nature into heaven at His Ascension.

To understand the Ascension we must go back to Christmas and the Incarnation. Christmas could be called the Descension, when the Son descended to earth through sin and death to take on our human nature. He atoned for our sin and defeated our death in His Passion and Resurrection. But the culmination of this mission was the Ascension. That whole divine movement ends today as Christ glorified, true God and true Man, returns triumphant to the right hand of the Father in heaven. The central event of all human history thus finishes. The mission of salvation is accomplished.

For Jesus, when He ascended into heaven, did not leave His humanity lying on earth, like the burial cloth at the Resurrection. His human soul and glorified body are now in heaven. He led the way for us. Therefore, just as Tom Woodward welcomed me into the circle of his high school friends, so we now have a place in a heaven we could never deserve on our own merits. In the Ascension humanity has been welcomed into the internal presence and life of God.

We must not see the Ascension as the feast of our waiting around for an absent Jesus to return as the Apostles seem to be doing in the first reading from Acts. The two angels come to the Apostles as they stand looking up into heaven and tell them, and us, to prepare to receive orders for action. Jesus remains with us, as the second reading makes clear. "[T]hrough the blood of Jesus we have confidence of entrance into the sanctuary (of heaven) by the new and living way he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh." Jesus hasn't left us! He's as present as He was then, but in a new way.

As Pope Benedict has written, "The meaning of Christ's Ascension . . . [is] . . . the belief that in Christ the humanity that we all share has entered into the inner life of God in a new and hitherto unheard of way. It means that man has found an everlasting place in God." So it's a mistake to interpret the Ascension as merely "the temporary absence of Christ from the world," as the Apostles seem to suggest by their immobile looking up to heaven. Rather, "we go to heaven to the extent that we go to Jesus Christ and enter him." Heaven is a person – Jesus. And where Jesus is, there is what we call "heaven."

And this is why the Eucharist is the center of our faith – this flesh and blood of Jesus that our second reading speaks of. Today it's not only the Ascension, it is also First Communion Sunday. These two go together – the Ascension and the Eucharist. They are both about the promise of union with the presence of Christ. For when Jesus is in us in the Eucharist, we are in Christ. And that oneness with Jesus is the beginning of heaven for us. Where Jesus is, there is heaven.

Today, the feast of the Ascension and First Communion Sunday, is a day to reflect upon the divine courtesy in this welcoming and invitation to heaven. What a gracious act! One of the divine attributes we too often ignore is the graciousness of God. To be welcomed into a group or place, to be made to feel at home, can never be demanded as a right because it is always a manifestation of a personal charity or love, and love can only be a gift. Just as there was no obligation for Tom to invite me into his circle of high school friends, so there was no obligation for Christ to descend to earth to save us and lead us to heaven. He was not compelled to escort and welcome our humanity to God's right hand. He was being gracious. It was the pure generosity of God's love that welcomed us into a heaven we could never deserve.

Tom was unknowingly sharing in Christ's own graciousness when he invited me into that basketball game, elevating me to a higher company through his own charity and courtesy. In the mystery of the Ascension the graciousness of Christ, mirrored in the heart of that high school boy who once offered me a lesser heaven, has now offered all of us an infinitely greater gift. Christ has made us human beings at home in heaven, in company we do not deserve to be in, but where, through His love, we nevertheless now truly belong.