

Recognizing the Sacred Presence in our Midst The Walk to Emmaus

Luke 24:13-35

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I want to begin with a theological pronouncement. Even though we can no longer see Jesus in person, we are assured that the Presence of Christ is always with us, even when we don't recognize that Presence. That's the overall meaning of Easter, including the gospel writer's post-resurrection narratives of Jesus' appearances to his disciples.

The promise of Christ's continuing Presence, as if Jesus is still with them, and us, is expressed in the Gospel of John through last Sunday's story known as Doubting Thomas. After Jesus' resurrection, when the disciples were fearfully gathered behind locked doors for their own safety, Jesus appears among them with the message, "Peace be with you." I mentioned how the Presence of Christ appears to us as we currently find ourselves in somewhat fearful isolation behind our own locked doors or our own safety.

Luke has a much different post-resurrection story, known as The Walk to Emmaus. You'd almost think that when a crucified Jesus, the Son of God, is miraculously resurrected from the dead he would make a splashy appearance, like before the religious leaders who called for his death, or to Pilate, maybe even to the Emperor of Rome himself. But no, in this story, on the afternoon of Easter, Jesus simply takes a walk on a dusty road. Seems quite ordinary and mundane. And yet, how so like Jesus. Already we get the hint that experiencing and connecting with the Sacred Presence in our midst can be tied to that which is ordinary and mundane in our life. This biblical story provides some guidance in how to experience and connect with that Presence.

Appearing to apparently two nobodies going basically nowhere (archeologists have never discovered a settlement that could be identified as Emmaus), is an interesting choice for the debut of the risen Lord. But this is our first important lesson. While those two disciples walked along, reflecting upon the events of the past week, it was Jesus who came to them. So often elements in Christianity talk about us "coming to Jesus" as though we are in control of what happens. In this story, we learn that we are not. Rather, it is Jesus who comes to them. **It is Jesus, God, who first comes to us.**

Jesus simply asks if he could become a companion along the way. From a spirituality perspective, this is very helpful, recognizing that Jesus – the Spirit of Christ, the Sacred Presence of God, the Holy Spirit – walks along with us on our journey through life. And what was going on with those two disciples on the way to Emmaus? They were consumed with grief and despair over dashed hopes and expectations, the obvious upheaval in their lives. Well, it's not hard to make a similar connection with the own

grief, despair, and upheaval in our own lives during this Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps, then, we will be able to recognize that Christ comes to us in these and other difficult circumstance in the journeys we face in life. Circumstances when we are filled with grief, despair, fear, confusion, guilt, doubt, loneliness, when our hopes have been shattered, when we feel lost and alone, when we simply don't understand. But this biblical story has yet more to reveal to us.

Notice that even as Jesus journeyed alongside those two disciples, they did not recognize him. There is no scholarly biblical consensus on why "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Some say it was God. But another possibility, metaphorically, is that they were consumed with their own thoughts and feelings concerning the situation they were facing. Applying that to ourselves, **perhaps sometimes we are so consumed with our own thoughts and feelings concerning the situations we are facing, like how we're trying to navigate life during this pandemic, that we can't recognize Christ's Presence with us.** But how can we talk of anything else at this point?

I've always wondered why Jesus didn't, and doesn't, just announce his presence? That would make things so much easier. Well, it simply doesn't appear to work that way. Instead, what does Jesus do? In this story, he frames things in a broader perspective, going back to the Hebrew scriptures to explain how the story of the Messiah was to play out all along. Perhaps, therefore, **we need to see our current situation in a bigger context and through the broader lens of God's perspective, such as God's will for a transformed and abundant new life for ourselves and the world.** That may include seeing our current journey as one in which we can help participate in bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice. But this story still isn't over yet.

As they arrive in Emmaus, night is falling and the two disciples, extending hospitality to this stranger, invite him to stay with them before continuing on his journey the next day. **Remarkable things are always possible when we extend hospitality to others, and particularly to strangers.** Even though Jesus was the guest, while at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Luke is obviously taking us back to last supper when Jesus did the same with his disciples. Luke is also obviously reflecting upon the early Christian church's practice of Communion.

So up to this point in the story, Jesus has shared with the two disciples both the interpreted word in scripture and what we understand as the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This is a reflection of Christian worship itself, which is based in Word and Sacrament, the very title to which Presbyterian pastors are ordained, as a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

What follows is perhaps the most relevant point for each of us in our own journey of life and faith. The disciples recognized that they were in the Presence of Jesus only *after* he had broken the bread and shared it with them, and then immediately vanishes from sight. Stunned and sitting alone at the table, **it was only in retrospect that they realize that the stranger was Jesus all along.** It was then they remembered that their hearts were burning within them when Jesus talked with them on the road. **Those two ordinary disciples are us, you and me.** As we travel along the ordinary paths in our lives, sometimes we are overwhelmed by current events, thus turning inward with despair or disappointment. Yet Jesus, the Sacred Presence of God, is already there, right beside us, though perhaps unrecognized.

This biblical story reveals that the risen Christ won't necessarily be in the form we'd anticipate. It reveals that we have to pay attention not only with our eyes and minds, but also with our hearts. When our "hearts are burning within us" Christ is there.

Also, scriptural knowledge has its place, as do our creeds and confessions, but they are not enough. We need to be open to the reality that Christ's Presence may well appear in ways that go beyond our preconceptions, but that always includes in the breaking of the bread.

Perhaps most importantly, and this has certainly been a pattern in my own journey of faith, **it is most often in retrospect, when we go back and reflect upon and review the events and feelings in our lives, that we then recognize that the Sacred Presence of God was with us all along the way of our journey.** In Ignatian spirituality, this is called the Examen, a reflection on the day, looking for an answer to the question, "Where was God present?" And remember, it is Christ who comes to us to walk along with us on that journey.

I suspect when we, as individuals and a community of faith, perhaps even as the human race itself, looks back over our lives during this coronavirus pandemic, we will then recognize those moments when God/Christ/the Holy Spirit was present with us. Together, we may indeed be transformed in a way that we will continue to witness signs of the resurrection and to recognize and experience the Sacred Presence that is always all around and within and present.

We are all on the journey to Emmaus.

Amen.