

On the Road Again

April 30, 2017

“They knew him in the breaking of the bread.”

Our Gospel today ended with that beautiful iconic phrase, “They knew him in the breaking of the bread.” It’s been used over the ages to talk about the importance of community and hospitality. It’s been used to help people wrap their minds around the concept that Jesus comes to us and is present with us in our generosity, often when we don’t even realize it.

To get there, though, we need to unpack this whole story. To start, our timeline is Easter evening. The text says that “on that same day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus.” The previous story in the Gospel was the story of the women finding Jesus’ tomb empty.

Now we’re a few weeks past Easter as we sit here Sunday morning, a few weeks past the trauma of Holy Week. So it bears looking back at what the disciples went through that week. They had followed their rabbi, their teacher, to Jerusalem. He had ridden into the city with great fanfare, with honor and celebration. They shared a Passover meal with him in which he added layer after layer of symbolism and meaning to that already powerful ritual, adding layers of love and personal sacrifice to that already rich celebration of freedom.

Then one of them had betrayed him, sold him out to the authorities who were afraid of his growing influence, afraid of his message that everyone – the poor, the sick, the outcast – all had value and deserved inclusion in God’s kingdom. Those authorities had been brutal: subjected him to a kangaroo court; incited mobs to take him down. And when they did this, the disciples had deserted him. They were nowhere to be found whether because of fear, or disappointment, or a combination thereof. Then after he had been in the tomb for three days, some of the women of their group said that he was no longer there, that angels told them that he had been raised.

That is the context of our passage today. It’s important to remember this because it gives us a glimpse into the mindset of these two travelers. They’re walking away to another village after hearing the women’s testimony. Are they afraid? Disappointed in Jesus? Disappointed in themselves? In society? In life? Are they bewildered, or mad, or grieving, or confused? Probably all of those things, and a lot more.

Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary says, “If we are honest, that’s where most of us are a lot of the time – somewhere between distress and belief. Between disillusionment and acceptance. Between dashed hopes and promises fulfilled.”

So they decide to go for a walk to get out of town, and they head toward a village called Emmaus. The name Emmaus means “Warm Bath.” They go on a walk toward “Warm Bath.” It’s a refuge, a comfort. For years I’ve read this journey as a journey seeking a comfort, of heading back to what you know in order to heal, of comfort food, of macaroni and cheese and an early bedtime. I read this as a journey of seeking safety.

But this year, I’ve come across several articles that name the two disciples’ journey very differently. In particular, Scott Hoezee of Calvin Seminary doesn’t see this as an innocuous or

even a healing journey. Rather, he names it as one of avoidance. He says, “Maybe it’s the mall where the noise of commerce and the rush of people keep you from thinking about life. Maybe it’s a bar where the booze and the beer nuts help numb you to the more bitter truths that swirl outside the windows of that darkened room. Maybe it’s a matinee at the movies where you go to take in what Hollywood proudly touts as ‘escapist fare.’ Maybe it’s the TV remote that takes you away from it all as you mindlessly channel surf every single evening. We try to escape our troubles. That’s when we head to Emmaus. Maybe we can escape our grief and troubles at least for a while.”

Whether it’s seeking the healing of comfort or fleeing our problems via distraction, these two disciples find themselves in a place I suspect we all have been and all will be again. They’re talking animatedly about all that’s been going on, and a stranger (who they don’t recognize yet as Jesus) approaches asking what they’re talking about. They say, “Are you the only person who hasn’t heard?” And he responds, “Heard what?” As simple as this exchange is, I think it’s brilliant. What Jesus does here is he invites them into telling their truth, telling the story with the nuances that are important to them, not only sharing the events of the last days, but exploring which parts of their experience have energy, and meaning, and questions for them.

Have you ever done that as a parent, or a teacher, or a partner? You have a pretty good idea of what’s going on, but you ask someone to share it in their words. We do this to figure out what the issues are for the person in front of us as well as because there’s healing in telling a story. In asking, “Heard what?” Jesus invites these two disciples into telling their truth. It’s only after that, only after they have named their great hope in Jesus as well as their disappointment at the current events, that he starts teaching them again. He reinterprets the scriptures and his teachings in light of their current concerns. He teaches to where they are right now. Again, this is brilliant.

Despite teaching and unpacking the scriptures for them, though, they still didn’t recognize Jesus. They get to their destination, to Emmaus, to the town named “Warm Bath,” and on a whim they invite him to stay with them. I’d like to suggest today that the truly transformative hinge in today’s Gospel is that in offering hospitality to the stranger, in treating this man with dignity and graciousness, the true disciples are living what Jesus had been teaching them all along. They embodied their rabbi’s teachings and then realized that it was him right in front of them. They did what he taught them to do: to show mercy and compassion, not just toward your family and friends, but toward everyone no matter who they are. And then they realized that their teacher was right there with them.

The two disciples were heading for a Warm Bath – whether that’s the comfort of healing or the distraction of avoidance or a combination of the two, we don’t know – they were heading for a warm bath when a stranger invites them to tell their truth and inspires them not to give up their teacher’s message but rather to embody it. Somehow they realize he’s not really gone, that he’s right there among them.

The takeaway here is clear: When we’re in those desolate places, whether they’re personal losses of death, or divorce, or careers going off track, or if they’re the societal horrors of terrorism or the rolling back of hard-won social policies, in the hard and broken times of life, it’s important to take time apart, to tell our truths, and then to live the things that are most important to us – compassion, and healing, and generosity, and extravagant hospitality, and radical

inclusion. We have to put flesh on what Jesus taught, especially in hard times. It's then that we will see the Lord Jesus Christ himself right here among us. It is then that we will recognize him in the breaking of the bread. Alleluia and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Luke 24:13-35
Easter 3A – April 30, 2017
April 30, 2017