

Sunday Morning Meditation
April 26, 2020 – Third Sunday of Easter
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Hospitality and Transformation

Scripture Passage – Luke 24:13-35

Throughout the Gospels we have seen and heard of many astonishing events: healings, exorcisms, the raising of Lazarus, the multiplication of loaves and fishes, and the sky opening up with the voice of God addressing those present. These many, convincing "revelations" are powerful, but no more powerful than the simple acts and events of this passage from Luke about the Emmaus story.

Friends are making their way from one place – a place of hope-turned-into-despair, a place of perplexity and the unbelievable tales of women – to another place: Emmaus. In *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner writes evocatively of the many ways we seek to find a place, an Emmaus, to run to when we have lost hope or don't know what to do, a place of escape, of forgetting, of giving up, of deadening our senses and our minds and maybe our hearts, too.

Perhaps you have gone to Emmaus, even though you are present in this Zoom service experience. Perhaps you have walked that long dusty road to a place of escape, a place of forgetting and giving up. A place of hopelessness.

I think that many people have walked down the Emmaus road in the last couple of months. Because of COVID-19 people have lost jobs and businesses. Fathers and mothers who had been able to provide for their families find themselves scrambling to put food on the table. Mental health experts warn that the combination of economic stress, social isolation and insecurity regarding the future, has already led to an increase in suicides and abandonment of children and spouses, that they fear will only get worse. As a society, it seems like we are all walking down a road leading

from the appearances of a proverbial Garden of Eden to an Emmaus that is a dark wasteland of human deprivation and suffering.

If we reflect on the stories before and after the death and resurrection of Jesus, we see that in these stories the disciples have been moving from places of hope to places of hopelessness over and over again. The disciples entered Jerusalem to the crowds chanting “Hosanna” and hope filled the disciples’ hearts. But that hope was soon dashed when those same crowds began to chant “crucify him, crucify him”. From the experience of hope they soon found themselves in the Emmaus of hopelessness. But then, came the stories of resurrection. First the women, then Peter and John, and then Jesus’ appearances to them. From the hopelessness of death to the hope of resurrection they rushed. From Emmaus to hope they went...

When you look at these stories, there are three constants. First, there is always the presence of community. We are so conditioned to read scripture through the lenses of western individualism, that we simply don’t notice that in all of these stories where the disciples go from hope to hopelessness, they are together. Together they are wrestling with each new reality, each new story, each new experience, each new trip from hope to hopelessness and back to hope. They are present together to support one another, encourage one another, and hold one another accountable. But most importantly, more than any other function, they are simply together as opposed to being alone.

Second, Jesus is present. It is true that Jesus was not present on Black Saturday. Loren Johns, an Anabaptist New Testament scholar and former dean of AMBS, suggested in an article that the Road to Emmaus story is told for the very purpose of making sure we understand that in our modern-day Emmaus places, those places of hopelessness and suffering, Jesus is there. Jesus may not have been present during the literal Black Saturday, but the two disciples’ experience on the Road to Emmaus does remind us that even in our darkest of Black Saturdays, Jesus is present, walking with us every step of the way... while also preparing for our return to hope.

And finally, in almost all of these stories, there are stories of hospitality. The hospitality of the crowds who enthusiastically welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. The hospitality of an unnamed stranger who provided the upper room, and perhaps the meal, for Jesus and his disciples to share on

the first Maundy Thursday. The hospitality of Jesus who, while hanging on the cross, instructed John to care for his mother. And now, the hospitality of the two disciples whose hearts were heavy, but nonetheless extended hospitality to a complete stranger... who unknown to them was Jesus.

The transformation from hopelessness to hope, came through the act of hospitality. What if the two disciples had not practiced hospitality? What if they had just let Jesus go on his way? Look at all of the stories in scripture where transformation comes, first and foremost, in and through the practice of hospitality. Because they opened their hearts to a stranger, their eyes were opened and hope returned to their lives.

Certainly, our present struggle with the pandemic that is raging around the world has caused many of us to follow the news and to feel anxious in ways we have never before imagined. Many, but of course not all of us, are used to a measure of everyday safety in our lives, but the threat of this pernicious virus has shaken the foundations of that kind of security. Like those disciples long ago, we're trying to integrate new information and experience into our old worldview. We may feel especially anxious and uncertain about what the future will bring.

We wonder if there will be enough of the things we need not just for the enjoyment of life but indeed for its very preservation. We worry about our own health and even more about the health of our loved ones, and our neighbors and friends...and strangers, too, all of God's children at risk.

The invisible enemy that provokes all this anxiety is hard to fight, and in the midst of that fear, uneasy resentments arise, blame and frustration abound, and suspicion and division ensue. We're not sure what to believe, or what to think, or what to expect, or even what to dare hope for.

Perhaps, then, we can relate a bit to those disciples long ago, trying to make sense of life after losing the One who had brought new meaning, new hope, new trust to their lives. Where was the next chapter of their story leading them, in the midst of this sorrow and loss?

If real estate is about location, location, location, then I believe that the Bible is about hospitality, hospitality, hospitality. We might hear and tell this week's Emmaus story, then, as one of *hospitality* and its deeper meanings.

Hospitality isn't a condescending or begrudging, dutiful sharing with others (preferably from our excess, not our substance – that way, we won't feel it so much): it's an openness to the Other, to our neighbor.

It's also an openness to the lessons they teach, the different perspectives and insights they share, and to the change that may follow. Hospitality welcomes the new learning that change brings, however uncomfortable and perhaps even painful that change may be.

Hospitality and openness make transformation possible, especially when brought to us from the most unexpected places by the most unlikely people, particularly by "strangers," especially those considered "other."

If we believe that we must see Jesus "in the least of these," as he taught us, then we have a clear mandate from him to share our table and its abundance with all who are hungry, physically and/or spiritually. And so, we are hearing, more and more, that there are lessons to be learned in the midst of our troubles and uncertainty and our fears, lessons about generosity, about sharing with strangers who then become unexpected sources of hope and help, of not fearing the "Other," of breaking our bread both literally and figuratively with all of God's children. Caring for one another (neighbors we have never met!) and speaking up for those hit hardest by the disaster (because for many, it is exactly that, bringing devastation of many kinds), finding creative ways to nurture community and friendship and family across "social" distances...these are all expressions of hospitality and generosity.

We are called to be generous toward, and supportive of, the frontline workers in both hospitals and grocery stores; we're called to learn about the ways racism plays a role in the disproportionate harm to many; we're called to open our hearts and minds and eyes to the reality of the suffering of our sisters and our brothers. How will we respond?

In the church, we can sometimes neglect both spiritual and physical hunger as we go about our "church business." Or perhaps we have a thriving hunger ministry with our food pantries and hot meal programs, while unintentionally neglecting additional ways to feed the spirit.

Yes, the spirit is fed when we are fully engaged in mission, but we also need times of quiet, of reflection and meditation, of deep prayer and meaningful worship, of spiritual growth through the arts and through nature.

Again, hospitality has the potential to transform our lives if it opens our eyes even more than we have opened our doors. It's not simply a matter of being *nice*; hospitality is justice and generosity embodied, a spiritual practice that both requires and brings spiritual growth.

It will take practice to develop this discipline because it's not easy to welcome all of God's children along with the hopes, and dreams, and beliefs that animate their lives and may transform our own.

There's the added challenge of offering hospitality while we are all having to practice social distancing in a way that makes gathering in our church buildings impossible. What creative ways are you finding (and sharing) to welcome spiritually hungry people to the table, even if that table is a symbolic one? How can we break bread together in virtual ways?

One way that we can open ourselves to one another and to others, is through sharing our stories. What stories define who you are? What stories are you willing to share? In the Road to Emmaus story, we have the coming together of food and story. The combination of food and story is central to our lives. Open your heart to one another, share a story and a recipe. It is one virtual way that we can welcome one another into our hearts and homes.