

Christ Among Us

Luke 24:13-35

May 8, 2011

I.

Today is Mother's Day, a time we recognize those wonderful women through whom God's gift of life came into the world. May God bless our mothers in all ages. And like you, I have many fond memories of my mother, but I'm moved today to say something about my grandmother.

When I was growing up my grandmother was just full of snappy one-line statements. I was amazed at how she could come up with all this stuff. Here are some examples. "Spare the rod and spoil the child." I heard that a lot. Or, "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere" Also quite familiar. Or, "Pride goes before the fall" Most of us probably are familiar with that.

Then, as I got older I began to read the Bible—actually, had to read it—and came to the Book of Proverbs. And there it was; the source of my grandmother's wisdom, revealed! Aha! was my first reaction. Busted! But then it gradually began to dawn on me that the Bible was sort of interesting. The rest for me is history; delayed reaction, but history nonetheless.

And today's reading is one of those more interesting stories. It was the subject of our very first Amazing Praisers play a few years ago. And so let's begin this way.

Knock, knock. (choir/congregation: "Who's there?"). Jesus. ("Jesus, who?"). Jesus who, indeed. Wasn't that a question in today's reading? Who was that stranger who suddenly appeared on the road to Emmaus? And at times do we find ourselves encountering a similar stranger?

The story began on the first day of the week, which was still Easter day; the day of the resurrection, probably mid-afternoon. The two travelers were Jesus' followers, but not any of the original remaining eleven disciples. And their conversation was about Jesus' death and the reports by some of the women that the tomb was empty.

Obviously they did not believe those reports, for they still were disappointed and disillusioned about how their own Jewish leaders handed Jesus over to be crucified. Certainly they would not have mournfully left Jerusalem if they thought Jesus was alive. But as the story unfolds we can see how it evolved from despair to joy.

II.

And I would ask us to begin by trying to relate our own experiences to the reading. We might think about times in our lives when we were discouraged, sad, worried, or despondent.

It might have been because of loss of a family member or loved one, or concerns about our health, or financial issues, or children, or problems at work. Any of those things might have put us in the frame of mind of those two people walking to Emmaus so long ago.

And in that frame of mind we might have let ourselves down and possibly fell short of trusting God. Perhaps our own roads to Emmaus were temporary hiding places. We might have wanted to get out of town, or have a drink, or just drop out for a while. And while none of those things were wrong in themselves, they might have led us to neglect faith in our Lord and Savior.

Let's examine how that worked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It began when they left Jerusalem in grief and sadness. The Messiah they hoped would liberate them from Roman rule was dead. And all of the things that Jesus had taught about forgiveness, love, and a different way of living just didn't make sense any more. It was all over. Finished. The End.

But then an interesting thing happened. Another person joined them. We all know it was the resurrected Jesus, but it seems they were divinely prevented from realizing it. How could this be? Jesus was not wearing a disguise. It was broad daylight. The sun was not in their eyes. And they even had been his followers. So why didn't they recognize him? I will come back to this.

For now, imagine you were watching this scene in a movie. Everyone in the audience would know what's happening, but the two people on the screen would be oblivious. You might wonder what was wrong with them. "Wake up, guys," we might think. The suspense would start to build, wouldn't it?

Then the plot thickened. Jesus, seemingly unaware of their sorrow, casually asked what they had been talking about. They probably looked at him like he was from another planet. "How could you not know what's been going on?" they asked. "Where have you been?" And adding to the irony, Jesus went along with them, and basically responded, "Oh, what happened?"

So the two travelers explained their hopes that Jesus of Nazareth would be the one to deliver and restore Israel, but that their own priests and leaders charged him with breaking the law and caused him to be put to death.

So as they walked along Jesus told them everything Scripture said about him. And Scripture, of course, would be what we now call the Old Testament, and there is a lot of prophecy about Jesus in there. They, of course, thought Jesus was speaking of the Messiah as a third person, and did not yet know he was speaking of himself.

Then, when they reached Emmaus they invited him, still a stranger, to stay with them. He did so, and in a role reversal at the evening meal, Jesus the guest became Jesus the host and took bread, blessed it, broke it, and offered it to them. Four days after instituting the Eucharist as the earthly Jesus at the Last Supper, he celebrated it as our resurrected Lord in Emmaus.

And in that moment they recognized him, and they knew that all the things he told them while walking on the road were true. Everything was changed forever. Despair became joy. They immediately returned to Jerusalem, found the other disciples, and shared their experience.

III.

What does all this mean for us today? A traditional understanding is that the Easter season confirms our hope for eternal life. We celebrate the time between Easter and Pentecost (which is June 12 this year) by recognizing that we have a new relationship with God, given to us by Christ on the cross, in which believers are promised a place in God's kingdom.

And eternal life is indeed our great hope and reassurance. It makes all else worthwhile. But what about now? What about the realities of contemporary life which at times seem to be the work of that other fellow who accuses us before God and seeks to bring us down?

The answer relates to why the two disciples did not recognize Jesus right away. Jesus does not force himself on us. He will not invade our lives like an uninvited guest. We have to ask him to be with us just as the two disciples in Emmaus did so. And he will become known to us in the breaking of the bread and in Scripture just as he became known to them in the same way.

There is a famous painting by William Holman Hunt called "The Light of the World." It shows Jesus standing outside a house knocking on an old unused door overgrown with weeds. The notable feature of that painting is there is no knob or latch on the outside. The door must be opened from the inside, where we are.

And if we open that door our Lord will be there for us. No matter how difficult things seem, no matter how disappointed or disillusioned we become, and no matter where we try to hide, he will come if we ask.

In addition, we will not have to defend or explain ourselves. Jesus will not admonish or rebuke us. He will meet us where we are on our own versions of the Emmaus road, and will guide us to faith and reliance on his way. But we must remember that he does not necessarily come to us to support our own worldly schemes or to strengthen us in our own agendas.

This means that while he wants us to ask him to stay with us, just as the disciples in Emmaus asked him to stay, he also asks us to follow him. We say "stay," and he says "follow." He calls us to live our lives in ways that prepare us for the coming kingdom, and to reach out to others in love and charity.

Today the church is where it starts. The church is the body of Christ, and we are members of that body. If anyone here, like the disciples in Emmaus, feels distressed over a problem or unsure about your spiritual journey, you have come to the right place.

And as you come forward later during the Eucharist, please know that you will encounter Jesus in the breaking of the bread just as those disciples did two thousand years ago, and know that when you ask him to be in your life, he will be there.

And perhaps many of us are not disappointed or disillusioned. Perhaps we are thankful for what God has done in our lives. I pray that we would use our time this morning to praise God for our blessings, and that when we partake of the Eucharist in a few minutes we will hear our Lord calling us to share our joy and peace with others.

IV.

The ancient road to Emmaus no longer exists outside of Jerusalem, but the journey it represents is found in every human heart. Those who take the journey with the same love of Jesus as the Emmaus disciples will be surrounded by his presence and God's peace.

And as we take the journey we will grow deeper in our faith and become closer to God. Three important patterns show this to be true.

First, the story of the disciples on their journey to Emmaus is the pattern of Christian life. We have disappointments and problems in our journeys, but we can look to Jesus for comfort.

Second, the hospitality offered to Jesus by the two travelers to Emmaus is the pattern of Christian discipleship. Through the practice of reaching out to others we encounter God.

Third, what Jesus did in Emmaus is the pattern of Christian worship. Through the teaching of Scripture and the breaking of bread the Christian community comes together to share fellowship, praise God, and renew our faith.

Let us pray that our eyes will always be open to him, that our hearts will always seek him, and that our work in the world will always honor him. Then we can go out and share the Good News with others. *Amen.*