

Sunday, April 26, 2020

Strange Breadfellows

[Luke 24:13-35 \(Click here to read\)](#)

Opening Prayer:

Lord, open our hearts to hear your words and our spirits to dare to journey with you. As you walk with us, as we journey together, may your word fill our hearts. As you speak with us, as your love is revealed, may your fire burn in our hearts. As we proclaim what we have seen and heard, may others be drawn to you, the risen Lord.

Dear Lord, you have so much to show and tell us, things that no human eyes have seen, things that no human ears have heard, things that you have prepared for those you love. Mighty God, your promises are like shelter in a storm—to us and to our children, to all those far and near, to everyone who hears your call. May we have the mind of Christ, that we may know and understand your truth. We wait as empty vessels, ready to be filled with your living water, as you reveal your love for us through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Christ has brought us together: together in faith, together in hope, together in love. We have gathered together to be sent out again: sent out with the welcome message of God's love! We go forth together to be living testimonies of Christ's love!

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There are several religious paintings that are classics. One of the most famous is “The Road to Emmaus.” And it shows three men walking along a rural road. I have seen this picture hundreds of times, and it fascinates me. I have studied it carefully. None of the men is wearing a disguise. None of the three is wearing a mask. None of the features seems obscured or blurred or indistinct. All three characters seem clearly defined. No stocking masks, no hoodies, no hats pulled down over the eyes that we see in videos of store robberies.

And yet two of the disciples of Jesus—two followers who had been friends and comrades of the Lord—walked and talked with him for hours without recognizing him. They did not identify him. He seemed to be anonymous. That is extraordinary, and many commentators state that Luke wanted us to be astounded by that incredible lack of perception. But as puzzling as this episode may be, it may serve as an example. By examining the story, we may learn what prevents us from discerning the presence of God. What stands in the way of identifying God in our midst?

The resurrection was not a sign to the world. If Jesus had desired to make his eternal life a lesson for the population, he would have been more obvious. There would have been a mass viewing, a public demonstration, a press conference. He might have appeared at the temple; he might have re-entered Jerusalem in a parade; he might have faced his enemies at the court of high priests; he might have gone on Youtube or Facebook. Instead, we read of one-on-one experience and small group encounters. God came in the intimate, the familiar, the particular.

Jesus returned to his friends to reassure them. They needed consolation. More than that, they needed to be freed from the crippling effect of the crucifixion on their own powers. The longer they moped around, the

longer they postponed their responsibilities. Jesus wanted to let them in on this fact of life: he had not been destroyed. They were his friends, and he wanted them to know he was all right. God hadn't let them down. When he appeared after death, his teachings were validated. The disciples knew they had the truth to spread. Relieved, encouraged, emboldened, energized by this evidence, they were ready to convince others of his message. The resurrection was not to be another part of dogma, to be believed as an article of faith, but was to verify Jesus' authority and power.

The disciples listened to the stranger's rendition of the scriptural evidence for the messiah. He recounted the prophetic testimony and told how Jesus fulfilled their foreshadowing. For our God is, first and foremost, a God of history.

The scriptures are not a textbook or theological treatise or science tome. The Bible is a journal, a tale of experiences and encounters with God. God does not come to us "out of the blue," either literally or figuratively. Our God has a track record, a trail of revelations and epiphanies. The only time I have ever sung in a choir in church was in Salem. Souci and I joined another couple in a version of a song my mother had taught me in my earliest years. "It is no secret what God can do. What He's done for others, He'll do for you. With arms wide open He'll pardon you. It is no secret what God can do."

And so memory is a resource when we are looking for our God. Recollection is a key instrument. That is a critical reason that we have a canon of narratives that we read from each week. The lectionary cycle aids us in going over the central theses and themes on a regular schedule. If we forget that our God performs miracles, answers prayers, forgives our sin, rescued the Jews, desires obedience and trust, created the world, sent a savior, or equips us with the Holy Spirit, the account will be repeated every three years. We do not need the Bible for doctrine or inerrant creed. It is most valuable as a reminder of God's ongoing and continuing interaction. The African-American spiritual asserts that "God didn't bring us this far to leave us alone now."

That is the purpose of our communion together. If we wonder about the extent of God' love, the limits of God's grace, the level of God's commitment, the amount of God's patience, there is the Lord's Supper. We repeat the words of Jesus that recall his crucifixion. We reiterate the commentary he made to interpret those events for his disciples and followers for all the centuries. Here's what God has done for you; here's what God will do for you. Our faith is based on historical transactions. Our God has a history. The disciples on the road to Emmaus needed a longer view.

The two who walked with Jesus on the trail became aware of Jesus when they stopped for dinner. It was customary for there to be a blessing of the bread, words of praise and gratitude to the God who provides. It is significant that the disciples became aware of the identity of their companion at that juncture. I would contend that we are most perceptive of our God when we are in a mood of thanksgiving. If we can acknowledge our gratitude, we will acknowledge the presence and activity of God.

Souci had a program for those with chronic conditions. People with longstanding conditions or health problems came together to learn how to cope and manage their daily lives. The group also served as a support group, as people shared their trials and troubles with one another. They exchanged strategies and methods for dealing with their problems. One lady in a group told how she had found herself crying before and after the session. Her first episode came in response to her suffering. Feeling pain and discomfort, she wept for her situation. Then she attended the session. And she wept again. This time she wept because she was ashamed of her self-pity. She had heard of the ordeals of others, the misfortunes of others, and she was upset that she could complain of her own circumstances. When she had a larger perspective, she was not that bad off. Perhaps God had not abandoned her, after all.

If we are focused on what we lack, concentrated on what we don't have, conscious of our insufficiencies, we are apt to miss out on God's benevolent activity. We are all prone to view the deficiencies in our lives with chagrin, without pausing to reflect on blessings and assets. When we see the affluent, we may question what we have. We can be malcontents. But we can take a mission trip to a third world country and witness the extreme poverty that exists in much of the world. We can visit a hospital to realize how fortunate we are to have our physical and mental health. A friend recounted how a couple had rescued a dog that was born without front legs. The dog had learned to walk on its hind legs—not just hop, but walk. The owners take the dog to hospitals where patients may be without limbs. The patients get a lesson in what can be done, even with a handicap.

A radio commercial had a man and woman in a car. They are looking for the best looking lawn in the neighborhood. He tells her to let him know when she sees it. She suddenly says, "Stop! This is the one I want." "But this is our own home," the husband says. "I know," she responds. "I've always wanted to say that." We may be looking for God when that God is already beside us...or within us. Since God is the giver of all good things, we are most conscious of God when we are conscious of our gifts. It is not that we take our blessings for granted. Perhaps our blessings are lost in the daily struggle with timetables and chores and negotiations and deadlines and duties. Meals on the run leave little time for saying grace. Do you stop to say the blessing over a "dirty water frank" in the city street? Would you pause to thank God for the sleep deprivation, the rat race, the dog-eat-dog environment, the petty confrontations? We need to contemplate the less tangible manifestations of God's presence: the Holy Spirit working within us, the forgiveness of sins, the comfort and peace in the soul.

The two disciples identified the Christ when they stopped their preoccupation with themselves. For miles they had been wringing their hands and uttering, "Woe is me." Their leader had gone. What would they do now? They were introspective. But fellowship with the stranger had served two purposes. The stranger had put the present circumstances into perspective. The disciples needed a broader context. "Yes," Jesus told them, "your leader has gone. But wasn't that to be expected? Shouldn't you have been prepared for it? God is doing something with that departure. God is working within that tragedy, and the outcome will be good and beneficial." God may be working even in the saddest scenarios to bring some redemption, some saving grace.

And God is usually present in the midst of hospitality and kindness and compassion. God is there in the selfless outreach to others. To be conscious of God, you must become unconscious to yourself. When you devote your time to the welfare of others, you receive a blessing that is assuring. Jesus has given us a clue to finding God, a hint to where to look. "Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do to me." So God may not be found in the lofty places: not seen as the rescuer, but in the one to be rescued. God may not be in the powerful, but in the powerless. God may not be the great helper, but the one who is helped. God may not be the caregiver, but in the one cared for. God may not be transcendent at the altar, but in the pew next to you.

The travelers to Emmaus felt their hearts burn within them. We are able to see the Lord by using our emotions as well as our brains. A purely intellectual, strictly rational, coldly logical faith will not permit us to see God in our midst. Our hearts must enlarge our vision. Too many of us relegate God to those days back then. We refuse to see God working subtly, slowly, surely.

The Christian needs to perceive God in the present,. It is not God's way to appear in bold, flashy signs from heaven. God does not autograph the handiwork. God's trademark is the fact that divine activity may be mistaken for a twist of fate, a coincidence, an accident, or luck. God works through unfamiliar, ungodly

means—poor people, strange incidents, seeming defeats. Jesus does not approach from on high, but in the midst of real life. The sacred moments are the everyday moments.

Jesus is in the midst of the ordinary: battling doubts, fighting frustration, wrestling with wrongs. Time and again we have sensed God: a voice has been heard, there has been a feeling; we have received a message. There has been a calm, a comfort, a courage. There has come an inexplicable strength, an insight, an intuition. There has been a coping under pressure, a wisdom in decision-making, a guiding hand in perilous times, a guardian angel in the face of trouble. There was a fortuitous moment, a lucky chance, an opportunity, an opening.

The disciples missed their leader, their friend, their loved one. You know how that feels. The disciples heard the stranger bless the bread and break it, and they knew. They remembered the one who had said it before. And in that recollection, they knew that he was still with them. Can you detect God working in your life? Perhaps we need to look in the people who are needy, the people who are homeless, the people who are ill, the people who are troubled, the neighbor, the co-worker, the alienated family member. Even more important, maybe others can discern God in your life; perhaps people can find God in you.

-Pastor Kelly