

Easter 3A - 2020

The Road to Emmaus

A friend shared with me a beautiful legend about a king who decided to set aside a special day to honor his greatest subject. When the big day arrived, there was a large gathering in the palace courtyard. Four finalists were brought forward, and from these four, the king would select the winner.

The first person presented was a wealthy philanthropist. The king was told that this man was highly deserving of the honor because of his humanitarian efforts. He had given much of his wealth to the poor.

The second person was a celebrated physician. The king was told that this doctor was highly deserving of the honor because he had rendered faithful and dedicated service to the sick for many years.

The third person was a distinguished judge. The king was told that the judge was worthy because he was noted for his wisdom, his fairness, and his brilliant decisions.

The fourth person presented was an elderly woman. Everyone was quite surprised to see her there, because her manner was quite humble, as was her dress. She hardly looked the part of someone who would be honored as the greatest subject in the kingdom. What chance could she possibly have, when compared to the other three, who had accomplished so much? Even so, there was something about her the look of love in her face, the understanding in her eyes, her quiet confidence.

The king was intrigued, to say the least, and somewhat puzzled by her presence. He asked who she was. The answer came: "You see the philanthropist, the doctor, and the judge? Well, she was their teacher!"

That woman had no wealth, no fortune, and no title, but she had unselfishly given her life to produce great people. There is nothing more powerful or more Christ-like than sacrificial love.

The king could not see the value in the humble lady. He missed the significance of the teacher. Often we miss the value of those around us. I think it would surprise us to know how often we miss the presence of Christ

just as Cleopas and his brother missed the significance of the stranger on the road to Emmaus.

The traveler, of course, is Jesus. And he plays dumb. "What things?" he asks. And they proceed to rehash what has happened, telling them about Jesus of Nazareth, and saying, "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel."

That has got to be one of the saddest lines in the Bible. "**We had hoped.**" These are the words of people whose dreams have been shattered and for whom there seems to be no future. "**We had hoped.**"

Jesus has been listening to their story but can't hold back any longer. He proceeds to go through the scriptures and what the prophets taught about the Messiah. About himself.

They arrive at the village and Jesus acts as though he is going to continue. But it is just sort of a head fake. Cleopas and his companion plea with Jesus to stay with them, as the hour is getting late. "Stay with us," they say. So Jesus stays and they sit down to a meal.

If "we had hoped" are three words of great sadness, "**stay with us**" are three words brimming with hospitality. Despite being wrapped up in a world of their own sorrow, these two disciples' hearts remained open and they had room for the grace to share hospitality with a stranger.

At this point they still do not recognize that it is Jesus. How could this be? Well, part of the explanation is that we see what we expect to see. **If we are not looking for something - or someone - we are a lot less likely to see it.**

Several years ago a musician, a violinist, set up to play in a Metro station in Washington DC. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. He set up at a station where thousands of federal employees get on and off the subway. He took out his violin and put a few bills and some coins in his case to prime the pump - seed money, which is always a smart move. This musician then faced the pedestrian traffic and started playing. It was 7:45 in the morning, right in the middle of rush

hour.

This wasn't just any musician. This was Joshua Bell, an internationally acclaimed virtuoso. He was in town to receive the Avery Fisher prize as the greatest classical musician in America. But here he was as a street musician, playing in the subway. His instrument was a 1713 Stradivarius violin, which he had purchased for a reported \$3.5 million.

The Washington Post had arranged this performance as part of an experiment. Would people notice this acclaimed musician? Even if they didn't know who he was, would people stop and listen? Bell played difficult, intricate, beautiful pieces. He played splashy, attention-getting pieces and threw himself into the music. Some were drawn to the music, including every single child who walked by, some of whom had to be dragged away by their parents. But over 45 minutes, a total of 7 people stopped to listen for a minute or more while around 1100 walked on by.

Bell made a total of \$32.17, \$20 of which came from the one person who recognized who he was. This is someone who regularly makes well over \$100 a minute.

For commuters that morning, Joshua Bell was just another guy trying to make a buck in the subway. They didn't really stop to look and listen, because we don't see what we don't expect to see. And we don't expect to see one of the greatest musicians in the world playing in the subway at 7:45 in the morning.

That afternoon on the road to Emmaus, Jesus was the last person Cleopas and his friend expected. They didn't expect to see him - and they didn't.

But then they sat down with this stranger at the table. Jesus took the bread and blessed it and broke it, just as he had done so many times, and they recognized him. In the hospitality offered and in the meal that was shared, their eyes were opened.

It is striking what they do when they understand that they have seen Jesus. They had implored this stranger not to travel any further because it was getting late, but when they realize they have been with Jesus, they

immediately head back to Jerusalem, never mind the hour. Rather than putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the authorities in Jerusalem, they head right back into the thick of it.

When they found the other disciples, they shared the news that the Lord had risen indeed, and how Jesus had walked with them on the road and had been made known in the breaking of the bread. And then later that evening, Jesus appeared to all of them.

One person wrote, "Emmaus didn't just happen; Emmaus always happens." We can find ourselves in this story. Cleopas' companion is not named, but you might just insert your own name there for that second traveler. We all have our own Emmaus, that place we go when we get the wind knocked out of us. It's the place where we head when grief and pain make our spiritual compass go haywire. The road to Emmaus is the road of deep disappointment, and we have all traveled that road.

In fact, we may be on that road to Emmaus right now. These are hard days. This is a difficult time. We have been physically separated from family and friends. We increasingly are aware of people we know who are sick, who are fearful, who are facing crises. And that might be us. Reality is setting in as we realize that life is going to be different for some time to come.

It is such a strange time, such a difficult time. But it was in a strange and difficult time that Jesus appeared to these two travelers. By the grace of God and through the light they allowed in through their hospitality and welcome, they experienced the Risen Christ.

In this uncertain and unsettling time in which we find ourselves, God is at work. And God may be found if we have eyes to see.

The challenge for us is to have the faith and the vision to look around us and to see all of the ways God is present with us. The challenge is to be open to the other, to pay attention to one another, to have eyes that are ready and willing to see.

Where do you see God at work? I would invite you this week to be on the

lookout for God sightings. Pay attention to those moments when, like Cleopas and his friend, we may feel our hearts being stirred.

It may be a small thing, a small gesture, a small reminder that God is with us. It may be an unexpected sign of hope and joy.

And when we have experienced Christ in our lives, our response, like the two on the road to Emmaus, is to turn around, to head back to Jerusalem, back to the place where we can bear witness to resurrection. In other words, look for signs of God at work in our midst, signs of new life, signs of resurrection, and be ready to share those signs with others.

The road to Emmaus is the road you walk when you leave your job, belongings in a box, not knowing where you will go next.

The road away from the doctor's office where you have just heard terrible news about your health or that of a loved one is the road to Emmaus.

The road back from the mailbox where you just found a "Dear John" letter is the road to Emmaus.

You are getting ready to set out on the road to Emmaus when the graduation ceremony is over, economic times and job prospects are uncertain, and repayment of student loans looms.

The road out of the graveyard where you've just buried someone dear is the road to Emmaus.