

"The Road to Emmaus"  
Luke 24:13-35  
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This morning's scripture reading concerns dreams- dreams born and dreams shattered. It is the account of two of Jesus's disciples who were on their way home- one Cleopas, and another who remains nameless. They were heading to Emmaus, a small village approximately seven miles from Jerusalem- a town SO obscure that this is the only reference to it in all the Bible. They'd been devout followers of Jesus, but with his unexpected arrest and execution, everything had come to a crashing halt- along with their LEADER'S death, something had died within THEM as well. Therefore, they had given up dreaming and were on their way home- back to that once familiar scene with its dull routines which Jesus had delivered them from just a few years earlier.

Only a week before, they'd been part of a great procession that had marched into Jerusalem waving palm branches to the cries of "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" There was great rejoicing and anticipation as Jesus, their king, entered the holy city of David, prepared to take his seat in the Temple. They were convinced he was their long-awaited Messiah who would make Israel GREAT once again, the one who would rally the Jews and overthrow the Roman occupation. "We had hoped that it was he which should redeem Israel," they said. But with their Leader now gone, confusion and despair had set in. They now knew that he COULDN'T have been whom they THOUGHT he was, that if he couldn't save HIMSELF, how could he be expected to save OTHERS? And so it was back to Emmaus to begin life over. It was now time to put their youthful idealism behind them and settle down- to resume their trade, find a wife, and begin raising a family. No longer were they disciples but farmers and fishermen once again.

However, with their thoughts turned inward and their feelings curved in upon themselves, their state of mind and heart have blinded them to where they cannot even recognize their Lord any longer- NOT EVEN when he walks and talks and eats among them. So consumed are they by their OWN sufferings that they're unable to see or care for anything outside or beyond themselves- not about Christ and HIS hopes; or for Mary, his mother, and HER broken heart; or even for his disciples- those who had known and been CLOSEST to him. And yet, though neither of them had been part of Christ's inner circle--the original twelve--their grief and disappointment were all the summons he needed to visit them PERSONALLY. It then becomes his mission to pull them out of themselves, to rescue them from their despair, and help them back into fellowship and community with the other believers where they TRULY belong.

It is often the case that when tragedy hits and dreams seemed dashed, that our initial impulse is to withdraw from the world at large and recede into ourselves, into our INNER world of private hurts and terrible sorrows. Those two unnamed disciples could be any of US this morning: a loved one dies unexpectedly, an accident leaves you permanently disabled, your company goes under, the stock market takes a nosedive, your house burns down, interest rates soar out of control, a child falls victim to drugs and alcohol, your spouse suddenly leaves you for

another person- and your whole world comes crashing down around you like a house of cards. The fact is that life remains precarious, and unfortunate circumstances or poor decisions or just plain bad luck can undermine all your accomplishments and destroy those dreams in an instant. NO ONE is immune from such threats.

And when it DOES happen, as it inevitably WILL, our initial reaction is FEAR: We ask ourselves, "What am I going to do? Where am I going to go? How will we pay the bills?" Or maybe DESPAIR: "What's the use of living? I have no future anymore." Or possibly SELF-PITY: "Nobody appreciates me. I can't do anything right. I'm all alone in this world." It doesn't take much before we become self-absorbed, curved in upon ourselves, the focal point of our lives and problems to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. As a result, our faith becomes small, our hopes become thin, our love becomes limited. By slow degrees, we soon find that God HIMSELF seems so distant, so irrelevant, so silent to us.

Of course, SOME fear and sorrow is not only NATURAL, it is actually quite NECESSARY to our lives. Fear is a vital response to emotional or physical danger which if we DIDN'T have, we couldn't protect ourselves against legitimate threats. It serves as a safety mechanism to prevent us from taking unnecessary or reckless risks that could hurt and even destroy us. However, psychologists tell us there is a danger to EXCESSIVE fear or sorrow and that is that it drives us deep into ourselves to the extent that it causes us to care only about OURSELVES and forget about everyone else. Thus, there's something selfish about it. The great Reformers like Luther and Calvin frequently referred to sin using the Latin phrase "curvitas en se" or a "curving in upon oneself." They viewed it as an excessive preoccupation with the self and one's own situation to the exclusion of everyone else. By becoming curved in, we cut ourselves off from God and friends and other vital connections. We begin to think only in terms of "me, myself and I." Some even develop a monstrous grudge against the world, feeling as though they'd been unfairly victimized by life. Selfish attitudes develop and with it a growing callousness to Christ's presence with the result that though he comes to us again and again, we STILL do not see him!

As evening descended upon them, Jesus is invited to stay for dinner. In the act of breaking bread with them, an obvious allusion to the Last Supper, their eyes are finally opened, and they recognize that Jesus had been present to them all along. Then, in the next instant, he vanishes from their sight- his mission to rekindle their hope and replenish their faith accomplished. Without delay, they hurry back to Jerusalem to alert the others whom they had just walked and talked and eaten with. From that moment on, they now know that their place is NOT to be in Emmaus, that is, in isolation from the rest of the disciples and the early church, but in CLOSE COMMUNION and INTIMATE FELLOWSHIP with them- and they waste no time in getting there.

A couple of years ago, a terrible tragedy gripped Overland, Kansas. A well-known racist and anti-Semite with ties to the Ku Klux Klan shot and killed three persons in the parking lot outside the Jewish Community Center. He thought that the three persons he shot were all Jewish when in fact they were all Christians with one of them being a grandfather--who was also a long-time family doctor—and another his 14-year-old grandson who had gone to the center to audition in a singing competition. He was prepared to sing a song called "You're Going to Miss Me When I'm Gone" which he had sung to his mother earlier in the day. They were members

of the appropriately-named Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, with their pastor being Adam Hamilton, a well-known Christian author and pastor of the largest Methodist church in the country.

Mindy Losen, the daughter of the grandfather and mother of the fourteen year-old boy showed up after the shootings had already taken place. As she got closer, she saw her father lying on the ground and her first thought was that he'd had a heart attack. "Then," she said, "very quickly I realized that it wasn't that and that dad was in heaven." She ran around his truck only to discover Reat--her son--lying on the ground surrounded by two men. One of the men grabbed her and held her tightly to prevent her from seeing that he had already died. She was led inside the Community Center where people took wonderful care of her there.

The day after the shooting, Mrs. Losen surprised everyone by attending an interfaith church service with hundreds in attendance. In fact, like Jesus among the two disciples on their way back to Emmaus, many weren't even sure who this woman in the red Oklahoma hoodie was as she walked to the pulpit with a friend helping to support her. Then she gave a most moving witness about what she remembered from the day before and how her faith was helping her to cope with such a profound loss. "Because there has been so much outpouring, we didn't want to hide and not let people grieve with us, and so that's why we're here," she told them. "I'm in shock but I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate all of you being here." She said, "I felt a lot of comfort. I felt God immediately. I prayed that Reat would survive. I prayed and prayed and prayed that he would survive." But I later found why he didn't." She also asked that people remember the third victim- a woman killed in her car at Village Shalom, a Jewish retirement home where she had been visiting her mother.

The service was organized by the Rev. Gary Demo of St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church and Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn of Temple Israel. In attendance were Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. The cantor for Temple Israel shared music that expressed a mourning no words could say. "There are no words but words are all we have," Bishop Dean Wolfe told those gathered. Still, with prayers and songs, they all tried to find some comfort. One of the speakers, Bill Tammeus, former Faith columnist for the Kansas City Star, admitted there were most likely no answers for their questions. But there were things they could do. "All major religions call on us to do certain things at times like this," he said. "To be agents of comfort for the afflicted...to be present for those who mourn." He asked that audience to educate their children and grandchildren in taking a stand against this kind of hatred. He also asked that they each commit an act in the next 48 hours to help rebuild a community "of compassion, justice, mercy, understanding and even...love."

What a powerful witness to the love and power of Christ in a time of terrible tragedy. Christ was PRESENT all right- he was PRESENT in and through the first responders who comforted her at the crime scene, PRESENT in the various persons who cared for her in the Community Center afterwards, PRESENT in the personal friends and family members who surrounded her with their love and support, PRESENT in the organizers of the worship service and the hundreds of attendees REGARDLESS of their own denomination or faith, and PRESENT in the prayers and outpouring of love she experienced from strangers all over this nation throughout the past week. Though we might not recognize him, Christ IS there all the same and his purpose is to comfort us and draw us out of ourselves, to call us back into

fellowship and community where we NEED to be. Fellowship and community in such moments become necessary for they will keep us from isolating ourselves; it will prevent us from withdrawing from people and the world and our responsibilities which is our natural tendency when confronted by fear or hopelessness or sorrow.

When I was in Irvington, NJ where I ministered for five years, I had a wonderful Elder named Millie Cranmer who I'm sure has passed on by now. An eighty-year-old widow who never had any children, Millie was one of the kindest, most humble human beings I have ever known. One Sunday morning, she showed up at church with blood on her nose, her forehead, and down the front of her coat. I exclaimed, "Millie, what the heck happened to you!" "Well," she said, "I was on my way to church when someone came up from behind me, knocked me down to the sidewalk, and ran off with my pocketbook. I haven't had a chance to clean up yet." "Did you contact the police and report it," I asked. "Oh, yes. I filed a police report," she said. "Then why didn't you go straight home afterward?" "Because, David, THIS is my home- right here, and I couldn't think of any place I would rather be after something like this than with you and my friends here."

In that Eucharistic meal, Cleopas and the unnamed disciple were suddenly pulled out of their solitariness, out of their deep discouragement and selfish introspection, and summoned back into fellowship with others. As my professor in seminary--Dr. Robert Goesser--liked to put it, "God is in the business of pulling us out of ourselves and sending us back into the race where we belong." In such community, we remind each other every time we gather of Christ's presence, ESPECIALLY when crisis and tragedy hit us, in those moments when our personal dreams and aspirations have become unraveled and God seems so very distant. In and amongst his Church--"Christ's Body"--we are led to forget ourselves and INSTEAD remember HIS presence along with the love and support we receive from OTHER people of faith. It is only as we are drawn out of ourselves, pulled out of our small cocoons of hurts and disappointments, that we will then see Christ and find the healing we all so desperately need to go on. Amen and amen.