

Table Grace, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. X3080406
Acts 2:14a - 36-41, Luke 24:13-35
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 6 April, 2008, 8:30 a.m. service
(From 4/10/05)

You are having a conversation with a dear friend. You are talking about sensitive subject. A stranger comes up to you both and listens in. How do you feel? Perhaps you think, “That is rather rude of this intruder.” This person has invaded your space, your private intimate meeting. Could that person be Jesus?

You are talking with your friend about important news, like the candidates in an upcoming election— something that is common knowledge. This stranger asks you what you’re talking about. What do you think? “Not only is this person rude, he is also rather ignorant. He doesn’t read the news or watch TV.” Could that person be Jesus?

So it could have been with Cleopas and his friend, walking toward Emmaus on that Easter afternoon. Frederick Buechner interprets Emmaus as

... the place we go to in order to escape--a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, “let the whole [darned] thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.”...Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car ...Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that [people] have had--ideas about love and freedom and justice--have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends.¹

These two were walking toward their Emmaus, getting out of Jerusalem with all of its painful memories. While they were pondering the meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion and the reports they had heard of the empty tomb, a person came up behind them and began walking with them. You might imagine what they felt at first. “This person is horning in on our conversation.”

There are two ironies of this story of Emmaus. While it appears that the stranger/Jesus is the only one who does not know of the events of the past three days, he is the only one who knows the meaning of all that has happened. Second, the ignorance of the know-it-all character is exposed by the character who appears to be ignorant!

One of them said, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (or to set Israel free).² “We had hoped...” For what do we hope? Perhaps we hope for and pray to God for peace, for security, and for health. Perhaps you hope for other things. The two were disappointed in their hopes because they pictured the redemption of Israel as coming in a militaristic way. God comes to us in unexpected ways and gives us peace, security, and health in God’s own way.

We find grace at the table of the Lord. Although the stranger may have irritated the two disciples by breaking into their conversation and by appearing ignorant, something very important happened. They invited the stranger to stay with them in Emmaus. They invited him to

¹Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* © 1966, New York, the Seabury Press, pp 85-86

²Luke 24:21

have dinner with them. Hospitality was an important tradition of Jewish people. It was the custom to invite the traveler and stranger in for food and shelter. Even today, Jews invite non-Jews and strangers to share in the celebration of Passover.

The graciousness of the two disciples was met by the graciousness of Jesus who took the bread, blessed it, and gave it to them. At that instant, they recognized the stranger as Jesus. Jesus did not force himself onto the disciples. Faith must always be a spontaneous, voluntary response to God's grace.

The risen Christ meets us on the road to our Emmauses— in the ordinary places and experiences of our lives and in the places to which we retreat when life is too much for us. But the story reminds us that Christ may come to us in unfamiliar guises when we least expect him.

The truth of this story is that Christ comes to us not in articulate theological statements or even in scripture, but in the intimate, yet utterly common gesture of breaking bread. Christ is present at the dinner table.

We recognize Jesus in the face of friends and strangers gathered around the communion table. Sometimes, Jesus is in the intruder, the ignorant, or the irritator. Sometimes, it takes a miracle to realize it.

Why could these two not recognize Jesus when he was walking with them? Why only later in the breaking of bread? There is a painting. From a distance one can clearly see the face of a man with a crown of thorns. But, as you get closer, the face gets lost in the detail of the many faces that make up the larger face. Did Jesus' appearance suddenly change or was it only in the breaking of the bread that the two were able to stand far enough back from the details of the past three days that they could discern the face of Jesus?

It is vitally important to our salvation that we welcome strangers and visitors into this church fellowship. In so doing, we are entertaining Jesus Christ. It makes no difference as to dress, or to mannerisms, or how they clean up or don't clean up the kitchen. This is Jesus' table and Jesus' church, not our table or church. The kitchen, the library, and the parish house belong not to us, but to God. This must be a place where new people can rub shoulders, make friends, and enter into our lives.

It says in the story from Acts that "... those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added."³ And how did the nice little group of disciples feel when three thousand people invaded their little church? You can bet things changed. Yet, together all of them could experience God's grace around the Lord's table. Jesus was with them in their welcoming and in their sharing life together.

There are some facts about the Risen Christ. His appearance is not some spiritual experience locked in the past, like at the Last Supper with his disciples. It is not a once and for all occurrence. The Emmaus Road experience is a statement that the risen Lord continues to be present with his disciples. He is here when we break bread together and when we have opportunities to meet and greet each other. The risen Christ is just as real for us today when we eat the bread and drink the cup of wine as he was for the disciples on that first Easter day.

It is wonderful that we can share that experience of Christ right here and every Sunday as we welcome strangers. He is here in this church. He is there at your own dinner table. He will be there with you on the common road tomorrow. You are never left to face alone the untraveled way.

³Acts 2:41