

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

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In the midst of our busy lives we all are familiar with and participate in travel. We travel each day to work, or to the store, or to visit a friend. Some of us have traveled far from our home to another country, and some stay in our neighborhood. The two men in the gospel story are also familiar with travel. These two men, one of them named Cleopas, were followers of Jesus. We encounter them as they travel away from Jerusalem. They were going home because there was nothing left for them in Jerusalem. The one they thought was the messiah had been killed. Their grand adventure of being a follower of Jesus was over. They were so defeated, it consumed them, leaving them without hope. We may be able to identify with this feeling of being consumed by grief. It is normal to put blinders on when we experience grief because it is so difficult coping with the grief. The blinders keep us from becoming so overwhelmed we cease to function.

Jesus decides to appear in the midst of this situation. He could have chosen to do something different after his resurrection by appearing in front of the religious leaders, thumbing his nose at them saying, "I told you I could rebuild the temple in three days". Or, he could have traveled around the country, showing himself to everyone, saying "look at me, I am back". But rather than do those things, Jesus in his first appearance after the resurrection decides to appear to two ordinary people, in the midst of their grief. For the two men in the story, grief kept them from seeing Jesus as he started to walk with them. They are not looking for Jesus, why would they, they think he is dead. When Jesus asks about their sorrow, they are so absorbed in that grief that they cannot believe that this person doesn't know about their experience. They tell Jesus the story of his own ministry and death, and add the dubious news of his resurrection.

And this is where the situation started to change. Jesus really walks with them, becoming part of it. You may have read the poem *Footprints*, describing a man walking along a beach. When he looks back at his life, he notices two sets of footprints, one set for himself and one for Jesus. He tells Jesus, when I went through the hard parts of my life, there were only one set of footprints and Jesus says, that is when I carried you. This poem may be helpful to the pious by showing one way Jesus walks with us. But this encounter with the two men is deeper than walking alongside, or even carrying them. Jesus fully enters into their experience and the two are transformed. They are no longer just traveling, they now are on a journey. To be on a journey is more than just going from here to there. It implies heading towards a higher goal and making a choice in order to return a different person.

Recent events have pointed towards the fact that, like the men in the story, we are at a point of making a choice. Will we continue to just travel without meaning, or are we headed on a journey? The men could have stayed where they are and eventually wallow in their own despair. We could make the choice to remain in our fear. Faced with conflict, we could pretend it did not happen and avoid discussing any topics that would remind us of the conflict. And we may be able to live together for a while using this strategy. But, it also could eventually cripple us and hinder our ability to live out our mission because if we stop communicating, we cease to be a community. To just stand still and do nothing leads to stagnation and stagnation sucks the life out of a community, eventually leading to death.

The men in the story stood still for a moment, only long enough to tell Jesus about their experience. And Jesus listens to them deeply and understands their grief. But Jesus knows it is not good for them to stay there so he leads them on their journey by challenging them. He says, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declare". The story is not about you and your disappointment, Jesus says. It is about life, the universe and everything in it. Jesus helps them out of their grief and despair and removes the blinders that prevented them from seeing what and who was right in front of them. The men respond with hospitality, "Stay with us", they say. They are in the midst of transformation as they really listened to their companion.

And what of our Emmaus journey? Will we even make the choice to go on this journey and if we did, where would we start? We could start by realizing we do not need to fear or avoid conflict. This past week, I attended first call theological education. The topic of the workshops was healthy congregations. Bishop Mullen came and talked to us, discussing conflict for part of his talk. He stated he had been to many congregations who were experiencing conflict in the first part of his time as bishop. He saw so much conflict that it almost put him into a spiritual crisis. But then in the midst of prayer and discernment, he had a revelation, that when a congregation is experiencing conflict, it means that the spirit is working, God is up to something.

As we walk this journey out of conflict, part of our task is to discover what God is up to in our midst. We know we have a history of welcoming. In fact, many of us are here because we were rejected by other congregations, or at least made to feel not welcome. We are here because we did not need to repent of our sexuality in order to worship. I can imagine at some point in our history, GLBT people were feared. People here may have called us sinners and said we were not good enough to worship. Perhaps they were afraid that their children would be recruited. But we know those before us did not stay in that place of fear. They walked down the journey of acceptance even though it was probably difficult for them. There are no quick fixes to big issues which means that they probably took their time coming to a decision that reflected their mission.

Now that we are further down the path of welcome, it is time to ask ourselves if we are done walking. Has our welcome expanded as far as it will go? Will we address the conflict over how to respond to the homeless? Is it possible for us to use a process much like the one people used to welcome us GLBT people? Can we recognize a challenge from Jesus inviting us to stretch and grow? Is Jesus telling us, just like the men in the story that there is more than just our own disappointments, asking us to truly live, to remove the blinders and really see who and what is front of us?

Our story gives us an image of a God and a church that walk alongside human confusion, human pain and a human loss of faith and hope. Jesus chooses to meet people in the midst of their deepest pain and not just carry them, but also bring them through the grief into healing. We may be challenged, but there is no expectation of immediate answers while we are led to really listen and understand. The men in our story did not recognize Jesus until the breaking of the bread, and then they were able to proclaim that their hearts burned within them. For us, the Emmaus journey challenges us to see that it isn't only our unshakable faith and deep spirituality that connect us with the risen Christ, but our smallest gestures of hospitality and friendship. We remember that Christ invites all to share in the breaking of the bread and we are invited to participate. And as we invite others to participate, we can also recognize Christ and be able to proclaim our hearts our burning.

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