

Recognizing Christ Along the Paths of Life

The Road to Emmaus

Luke 24:13-35

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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A few years ago I was asked to be part of the Planning Team for my former Presbytery's annual Spirituality Retreat. The team met numerous times over a six-month period in order to prepare for this event. The theme and title of that year's retreat was "**Seeing the Unseen God.**"

The keynote speaker was Teresa Blythe, a Presbyterian who works as a Spiritual Director in Tucson. She is also an author, and does book reviews for the *Presbyterians Today* magazine.

Teresa specializes in finding ways to help people recognize God in their midst – not only in church and religious settings, but also in popular culture, especially in media, like movies, TV, and music. I have a friend who had done the same thing in leading a series of classes on the theological themes found in the music of U2. And there are book studies on the theological themes that can be found in *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, etc.

Teresa's main premise is based on the current, and I think correct, notion that **most people today – especially the younger generation and those that aren't necessarily regular church-goers – want less information about God and more experiences of God.**

One of my responsibilities as a Planning Team member was to work with a couple of other folks to plan, write, and lead the morning and evening devotionals and worship services. We chose Scripture passages that made reference to seeing the "unseeable" God. The Bible passage that we chose for the closing communion service at that Spirituality Retreat is the same as today's sermon text from Luke 24, known as the **Road to Emmaus** story.

This biblical account, which I believe uses metaphorical language, takes place late in the afternoon on Easter Sunday. We are told that the resurrected Jesus joins two unnamed disciples who are walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. These two disciples do not recognize Jesus as they travel, speak, and listen to him. But when they arrive at Emmaus, Jesus breaks bread with them. It wasn't until that moment that they recognized they had been in the presence of Christ all along. Scripture puts it this way, "their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

As it turns out, this is a very important and informative biblical story. Therefore, **we need to explore ways to apply this narrative to our own lives.** To begin with, a fairly obvious question comes to mind:

How often do you and I travel along the everyday paths of our ordinary life (just as those 2 disciples were doing) and fail to recognize the presence of Christ, the presence of the Divine, in our midst?

Since it is true that there is never a place where we go where God isn't also present with us, then perhaps we need to be more intentional about discerning and reflecting upon how God is present with us throughout each and every day.

Many biblical scholars believe that the purpose of post-resurrection stories like this one was to reveal how these ancient gospel writers tried to put into words the very real phenomenon of experiencing the continuing presence of Jesus among and within the Christian community decades after his death. **The gospel writers are encouraging followers of Jesus (and that includes you and I) to move beyond the historical tradition about Jesus to a personal experience of Christ and God in our midst.**

In today's story, Luke reveals two distinct actions of Jesus that led those two disciples to recognize him. Perhaps we can use these as clues as to how we can experience the presence of the Divine today.

First, Jesus recites and then interprets for them the Jewish scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. As Presbyterians, we approach the reading and the interpretation of the Bible very seriously, for we believe that God and Christ are indeed revealed to us through these ancient words and stories. **The fact that Jesus needed to interpret the scriptures is also instructional in revealing that biblical interpretation isn't just a private, personal endeavor, but something that is best done in community with others.**

The second action of Jesus that Luke reveals as leading to recognizing the presence of Christ is when the risen Lord **breaks bread** with them. This action, and the specific language used, is certainly intended to recall the last supper with the 12 disciples. And it makes a clear and intentional reference to the **Sacrament of the Lord's Supper**, a tradition already well established in the ancient church when Luke wrote his gospel some 40 years after the death of Jesus.

Breaking bread in biblical times also meant sharing a meal with others. The elements of fellowship and hospitality are part of this experience. We are reminded how important it is that we spend **quality time in fellowship** with one another, especially in the sharing of a meal.

As importantly, we learn how crucial it is that we are intentional about **demonstrating true hospitality** whenever we gather together. I experienced this on Thursday evening when I gathered with a large group from Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry.

I experienced it again just yesterday afternoon when 30 of our Hispanic members and friends threw a Fiesta in order to get to know me better. As we broke bread together and shared the current status of College Hills' outreach ministry to the Hispanic community I believe we all experienced God's presence in our midst.

Today's Gospel Lesson, then, informs and reminds us that **both the interpretation of scripture and the breaking of the bread (word and sacrament) appropriately go together.**

Another important element in this story has to do with the fact that it was Jesus who joined the two disciples as they were *already* traveling down the road. This points out that **an experience of God's presence in our midst isn't so much the direct result of our efforts to seek God, as it is God's efforts to seek and reach out to us.** And, I believe, this applies not only to Christians but also to all of humanity. **So the question becomes: Are we paying close attention to the God who continually seeks us out?**

In addressing the question, "**Where do we 'see' the unseen God?**" at that Spirituality Retreat, Teresa Blythe mentioned the following, yet not all-encompassing, list: in Jesus; in stories from Scripture; in meaningful metaphors; in dreams and visions; in inexplicable experiences; in prayer insights; in other people; in nature; and in art and culture.

In other words, **since God is present everywhere and at all times, we should be open to experiencing God in all things and in all places** – in both the good and the bad.

Crucial to the development of our spiritual lives, as followers of Christ along the paths of life, is our desire to pay attention to and be intentional about recognizing God in our midst. That, in fact, is one of the best definitions of the term "**spirituality**" – **seeking to recognize and experience God in our midst.**

All of these things should also help us focus upon looking for the unseen God not only in our personal lives, but also in our midst **here at College Hill.** Where and how, for instance, is God present when the choir sings, when the organ plays, when the youth group gets together, when we share times of fellowship, when we attend church school classes, when we work on the building and grounds, when the elders on the Session meet, when we seek to discern the future vision and direction of this congregation?

As we reflect upon these things, may God bless us in our ability to see the unseen God along the paths of life that we travel. **For I truly believe that God does indeed meet us in those ordinary places and experiences of our everyday lives, and certainly as we break bread together in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.** Amen.