

April 30, 2017
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Luke 24:13-35
“Falling in Love at Church”

Let me just start by saying: I fell in love with this story this week—the “road to Emmaus” story. It was not love at first sight. I’ve known this story for decades, but it never particularly drew or repelled me before. Of all the “road” stories in the Bible, I’ve felt more drawn to the Damascus Road story, where Saul is “blinded by the light,” or the road to Jericho where the Good Samaritan shows off his neighborly prowess, or Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week.

This story was not an obvious love-match for me this year because I come to the story as someone who really doesn’t want to think much about walking. As some of you may know, I’ve been struggling with plantar fasciitis for almost a year. Things are a lot *better* right now, thanks to physical therapy, stretching and an expensive array of devices and shoes. But I still wonder everyday as I swing my feet over the side of the bed and sit up, how much is it gonna hurt to stand up this morning? The thought of meeting Jesus on a road after walking seven miles sounds horrific right about now, unless he was planning on this being a miraculous healing story.

But I forced myself to play, “I spy,” with this story, as I did with the Easter story this year. I was true to the predictions of Dr. Arthur Aron, who several years ago published a study that got a lot of media attention. The headlines called his study findings “a recipe for falling in love.”

Here’s what they did: they put pairs of opposite-gender heterosexual strangers (who had done an initial survey that matched them by some basic attitudinal compatibilities) into a room together for an hour and a half, to ask each other a series of personal questions and to conclude with four minutes of sustained eye contact. The idea was that “mutual vulnerability fosters closeness,” and that perhaps this artificial format would accelerate that process. It got its reputation as a recipe for love largely because one such random pairing of strangers from that study got married six months later.

I feel like this can be true of a story, too. And I think it’s how I fell in love with today’s scripture: the increasingly personal questions I asked of it, and the increasingly personal questions it seemed to ask of me. And then there’s all that staring at the text, and the highlighting with different colors... So, I invite you to follow along – maybe you’ll fall in love a little, too. The text is in your bulletin, for your eye contact pleasure, and you can join me in engaging it with curiosity and vulnerability.

So, we meet Cleopas and “friend,” the main characters of this story, who had been followers of Jesus and were walking away from Jerusalem. It’s literally the same day that the empty tomb was discovered, and the group of women who witnessed it were totally dismissed as tellers of idle tales. It’s the third day since Jesus’ death, and they’re sure that the last chapter of Jesus’ story has been written and that they’ve read the ending, which was disappointing and anti-climactic. So they’re “outta there,” walking home to Emmaus. I picture them as campaign workers of the candidate who lost, walking home downcast.

A man comes alongside them as they walk, and asks what they’re talking about. They “stand still, looking sad” but their words are almost sarcastic – “what rock have you

been living under if you don't know what happened this weekend? Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet, was turned over by the Jewish authorities, and crucified. BUT WE HAD HOPED" (note the past tense) "that he was 'the one' who would redeem Israel."

So this story, which is touted as a model of what church is, is a gathering of *former* believers. Of sad, dejected former believers who couldn't see meaning in Jesus' death, and couldn't imagine a resurrection. Here, Jesus responds to them – they still don't recognize him, but he chastises them: "How foolish you are! And how slow of heart to believe the prophets – you should have known that the Messiah would suffer!"

What I find interesting is that he doesn't seem to question their lack of expectation of his resurrection, or their difficulty believing that he died. He chastises them for not understanding the rightful place of suffering and death in the story of the Messiah. When the triumphal narrative that they'd projected on the Messiah went off-rails, they couldn't see that how Jesus' story, as it *actually* turned out, might have had necessity and meaning any more than they could recognize as Christ/Messiah this person who joined them in the midst of their dejection.

I love how the story then basically skates right past the little detail that Jesus goes on to tell them the meaning of anything he'd ever said, and that this lecture he apparently gave didn't cause them to recognize him, either.

If this story is a tutorial of what church is supposed to be, it's a very interesting one: it starts with believers gathered – and only 2 of them at that – ironically, they are gathered in their *un*-belief, and they are walking away from the other disciples, and away from the cross. But they are walking together, and they're talking honestly with one another. They're repeating the story of their experience, working out its meaning, and what they should do now. They welcome theological debate with a stranger. They welcome conversation with a stranger, and when they get far enough down the road that it's getting late, they invite this stranger into their home.

So, that's a pretty good church checklist: sharing their story, having theological discussion with a stranger and offering hospitality to the stranger. Then they gather around a table together to share a meal. At that meal, the stranger suddenly takes on host duty, and blesses the bread and shares it with them. It is here that they finally recognize Jesus, and then immediately Jesus vanishes.

The aha! moments in this story are: 1) when Jesus breaks bread with them at a table – it's reminiscent of both the feeding of the 5,000 and the Last Supper they finally (aha!) recognize him! and 2) right after he vanishes, it is then that they retroactively recognize the "burning in their hearts" and identify it to have been happening way back on the road while they were talking in the midst of their companioned dejection.

It is, in the words of Lukan scholar Alan Culpepper, "One of the secrets of a vigorous spirituality and a confident faith, ... learning to appreciate the importance of meeting God in the past as well as in the present." This story "guides us in this spiritual discipline." (*New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Luke*. p. 482)

Yes, in this story, they recognize Christ in the present, in the breaking of the bread, but they are also able to look back and recognize God's presence at a point in their journey when they had not seen or feel it at the time. That, too, is faith. That, too, is part of the tutorial of church that this story is – that we not only seek to recognize Christ in the stranger among us, and seek to put the stranger in the center, and be taught by the stranger, to be hosted by the stranger, the newcomer, even within our own home, but that

we help one another *recognize and remember* the times when Christ has been present with us in the past, both corporately and individually. We re-tell those stories and remember them and in so doing, they too become a feast for 5,000 – shared and shared, and always still leftover.

So yes, I fell in love with this story. I fell in love with Cleopas and friend, and their past-tense belief, and their litany of “But we had hoped for . . .” Do I not have my own list of, “But I had hoped for’s?”

I fell in love with this Christ-stranger who joins them on the road, engages in a theological conversation, doesn’t invite himself in, but also doesn’t reject the invitation of hospitality; this Christ who is both guest and host, who breaks in to the most ordinary and beautiful and needful of human rituals and this Christ who waits to be revealed in hindsight and who has likely warmed my heart more often than I even realized.

It was in coming together for this meal that they were able to make sense of what had happened on the road. That they were able to see where God had been present with them, that they had been able to really see one another.

I love this story for reminding me that we are just as likely to host (and be hosted by) Christ among us on our most curmudgeonly Sundays as on the ones when I feel we are the most piously welcoming and expansive. I love this story for reigniting my yearning for the re-telling of my stories, our stories, your stories, to remember when our hearts burned, and to be warmed once again at those fires.

Maybe this is how we fall in love with each other here . . . One of the things I feel most passionately about church, is the potential, and societal permission, that church has that few other organizations or communities do: that you can share communion with strangers. You may end up at the same church because of some similar values and attitudes, but you do not have to be BFF material to love and be loved at church. Church is the artificial construct that brings people to one another through the deep questions, and through the eye contact and sharing of a meal. Mutual curiosity, vulnerability and eye contact may not be a recipe for love guaranteed to work every time, but it’s the only one that ever has.

In closing, I’d like to read a short passage from Mary Oliver’s *Upstream*, in which she recounts a walk that she took as a child. In it she gets lost, at least her parents think she’s lost. But she experiences it as finally finding herself in the nature and creation she meets as she walks. “I do not think that I ever, in fact, returned home,” she writes (p. 5).

You never quite go home after really meeting another person, either. You are changed in that intimate communion, as Mary Oliver was changed on that walk.

Cleopas and friend never really returned home, either, even though they got to Emmaus. They met Christ on the way and they became church on the way.

How might our communion, our re-telling of our stories to discover our past and present burning hearts, our time spent making eye contact with one another – how might we become church to another by these recipes, too?

Daniel Jones, “The 36 Questions that Lead to Love.” *The New York Times*. January 9, 2015.

Also, Mandy Len Catron, “To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This.” *The New York Times*. January 9, 2015.

Arthur Aron, Edward Melinat, Elaine N. Aron, Robert Darrin Vallone, Renee J. Bator,

“The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings.” from the SAGE Social Sciences Collection.
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0146167297234003>