

On the Road to Wherever

Luke 23:13-35

St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans
Sunday, April 30, 2017
by Paul R. Powell

Dr. Maxie Dunnam, President of Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, tells the story of a businessman who boarded the overnight Amtrak train here in New Orleans bound for Atlanta. He was a heavy sleeper and needed to be awakened about 5:00 AM so he could get off the train in Atlanta to attend a very important meeting. So, he finds the porter and explains his situation, telling him, “No matter how much I complain or resist, please make sure you wake me up and get me off the train in Atlanta, even if you have to bodily remove me.” Well, the next morning the man wakes up about 9:00 and discovers he missed Atlanta. He jumps up, finds the porter, and cusses him out royally for not waking him up. After he leaves, a nearby passenger asked the porter how he could just stand there and take such abuse. “Well, says the porter, “that was nothing! You should have heard the man I put off in Atlanta!”

Sometimes, we miss the station, and sometimes we miss the train altogether. Or for most of us who travel by car, maybe you are like me: I can always find the right road or street, but invariably head in the wrong direction. As believers, we sometimes miss the road altogether. We believe that Christ WAS raised from the dead; we believe that he DID ascend into heaven; we believe he WILL come again, but we miss the very heart of the story—which is that Christ LIVES here and now and walks WITH us along the Road to Wherever.

The “Road to Emmaus” story has been read and told so many times that there is the danger of overlooking its message in the details. And yet, it’s the overlooked details that give us the real message. The story is told only by Luke, and among the first details we overlook is that the story takes place later on the same day as the Resurrection. We often overlook the fact that Jesus was only in the grave for a little over twenty-four hours. He was crucified late in the day on Friday and quickly buried before sundown, so as not to break the Jewish law of working on the Sabbath. And the women who came to anoint the body could not do so until after the Sabbath was over at sundown on Saturday. Hence, they waited until early on

Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus with oils and spices, the common practice in those times of attempting to preserve the body. Much to their surprise, the body was not there as expected, and they assumed that someone had stolen it. When the angels from God appeared to tell them that Christ was not dead but alive, they were scared to death, but as these angels reminded the women about what they had been told, their fear turned to joy and they couldn't wait to get back to tell the eleven disciples and the other followers who had gathered, apparently, in the same room where they had eaten the Last Supper with Jesus, and where he had instituted what we now celebrate as communion. Some, including St. Peter, ran out to the tomb to see for themselves what the women had reported.

On the same day, two of these persons, one of whom was named Cleopas, were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a small village near Jerusalem. They are talking excitedly about the events of the day and barely notice a stranger who is headed toward them. When the man comes alongside, he asks what they are talking about, and they respond by saying, "You must be the only stranger around who hasn't heard about what has happened these past three days." "Wait, what?" the stranger asks, and they recite to him a brief summary of Jesus's earthly career, his passion, and his death. Even knowing all these details, they simply did not recognize Jesus as he stood with them. So, Jesus reviews all the prophecies foretold about him and how the Messiah must suffer in order to bring about his spiritual reign. As they near their destination and as it was growing dark, they invite this stranger to stay with them. While they are eating supper, Jesus takes the bread, breaks it and blesses it, and only then do they remember the Last Supper and recognize that this stranger is indeed the risen Christ. They have been told the story and they also have told the story, yet only when they break bread with him do they realize that Jesus is with them.

It begs the question; how many times does Jesus come to us and we don't recognize him? How many times does Jesus depend on us to be his presence to others desperately in need of communion with him, and yet they don't recognize Jesus in us? Baptists used to sing a gospel song "Let Others See Jesus in You" quite often, and it reminded us that we should live and speak in ways that others would indeed see Jesus in us. But just as importantly, do we see Jesus in those around us who may or may not be believers?

Did you recognize Jesus in the desperate struggle of a friend or relative to overcome an addiction? Did you recognize Jesus in the nurses' aide who changes the diaper of your aging and helpless parent at the nursing home? Did you see Jesus in the faces of those who have killed or been killed by violence? Did you recognize Jesus in the faces of the starving refugee children from Syria or South

Sudan or Latin America? Did you see Jesus in the face of the desperate illegal alien looking only for a place to live and work free from the oppression of a merciless society? Did you recognize Jesus in the face of someone struggling with grinding poverty, with debilitating self-doubt, or with the fear that God just doesn't care, or yes, even with God's call to a life of service? We may talk and work hard to achieve social justice but until we break bread with those who are suffering from injustice AND those who are causing the injustice, we have no hope of bringing Christ's healing presence into the mix. The cross of Christ must be squarely planted at the crossroads of social action and Christian mercy, just as Emmaus stood at the crossroads of knowledge about Christ and actually breaking bread with him.

A few weeks ago, I came across the story of Megan Phelps-Roper. If the name "Phelps" sounds familiar to you, that's because she grew up in Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas, that church infamous for picketing funerals and gay pride parades, proclaiming how much God hates gays and even those, like the military, who tolerate gays. Like her pastor-father, Megan told people that God hates them, and that anyone who disagreed with them was going to hell unless they converted to Westboro's doctrines. Megan even took her church's message to Twitter. Many people who responded fell right in line with her hatred, but there were a few that genuinely cared about her. As she says, *"The truth is that the care shown to me by these strangers on the Internet was itself a contradiction. It was growing evidence that these people on the other side were not the demons I'd been led to believe."* Megan changed because she felt people genuinely cared about her. Maybe our greatest hope comes when we stop demonizing one another and begin to treat one another as human beings, as children of God, when we see Jesus in everyone we pass along our own Emmaus Roads.

Did you see that 60 Minutes story on the happiest countries a few weeks ago? Last year it was Denmark, this year Norway. Wait, what? Two of the coldest countries in the world are the happiest? How can this be? God forbid, in Denmark, they pay almost half their income in taxes. Yet, almost the whole population is happy to do so because it means that everyone has what they need in terms of jobs, housing, food, education, and services. There are no truly poor people, and those who desire wealth can obtain it without robbing their fellow citizens of their livelihood. If people are unhappy, it's not for lack of life's basic needs. They have learned what we Americans need to learn, and that is, "When life is better for **each** of us, it is better for **all** of us; and when it is better

for **all** of us it's better for **each** of us." And, my friends, that is BOTH a democratic and a Christian ideal.

Let me close with a personal story or two. My first church position right out of seminary did not turn out so well and I found myself back in New Orleans doing clerical work at a shipping company and wondering what it was I was supposed to be doing next. Find another church position? Another vocation? More education? One day, as I was headed through the Quarter to the office, it was pouring down rain, and just as I passed this young man, I heard him sobbing. A few steps later, I felt compelled to turn around and ask him what was wrong and could I help? It seemed he was a nurse and was really, really upset with the doctors who never got past issuing medications to actually see and treat their patients as real people; doctors who talked but never listened to either the patients or the nurses who knew better than anyone else what their patients needed. We chatted for a few minutes, and then went on our way. I don't know whether I really helped him or not, but it became clear to me that my call to serve God meant "wherever" and "however." For me, it was an Emmaus Road experience.

On another occasion after returning here some 16 years ago, I was in the Quarter one evening during Mardi Gras. I had sat down on a stoop to rest for a few minutes when a young man approached me and started witnessing to me. Apparently, he was with a church group from Chicago who had come down to New Orleans to save all the gays and other misfits, and by save, I mean to convert them to their own dare I say "perverted" view of Christianity. Apparently, there weren't any folks in Chicago in need of their testimony! If memory serves, this was the first Mardi Gras after Katrina. After I told him I was already a Christian, I suggested that perhaps a better way to witness for Christ would be to join the countless work groups who were mucking out houses and cleaning up the devastation. Later a very nice couple stopped and started the same conversation, and again I suggested that doing something might be better than trying to convince people not to enjoy their so-called wicked entertainments. I don't think either the young man or this couple were convinced, and I admit I was way too judgmental toward them. To hate the haters is to become a part of them. When will we ever stop dividing ourselves into them and us? When will we realize that there is only "us?" Community comes when we "break bread" with friend and stranger alike.

Like those early believers facing an uncertain future who finally recognize Jesus when he breaks bread with them, we, too, must be reminded of the details of the story, but we

must also understand that faith is a journey on which we take up our own cross in simple faith to follow Jesus, no matter where our Emmaus Road may lead us.

Look again at Emmaus. See it at the crossroads of fear and faith, at the crossroads of politics and religion, at the crossroads of us and them. Learn that Christ must be welcomed into our lives to break bread with us. Learn from Malachi that what the Lord requires of us is “to DO justice, to LOVE mercy, and to WALK humbly WITH God.” Break down your faith to its simplest terms by remembering that Jesus said, “Love God with all your hearts, minds and souls; and love your neighbor as yourselves.” If we can follow these words, then and only then, can we ever hope to change “them and us” into “US.”

We began our service by singing “Thine is the Glory” and we continued by reminding one another to “let our hearts be broken for a world in need,” and we end by praying for God to “lift the smallness of our vision.”

Dear God, make it so!

AMEN.

Hymns:

251 Thine Is the Glory

429 Let Your Heart Be Broken

720 Christ, Whose Purpose Is to Kindle