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The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ
3rd Sunday of Easter – April 26, 2020

I. Not Important

The summer after I graduated from seminary, I went on a road trip with a group of friends.

We went to experience the artist's community in Glover, Vermont known as Bread and Puppet.

Located in rural land near the Canadian border, Bread and Puppet features an open-air show with 20-30-foot-high papier Mache puppets operated from below by performers with long sticks.

It was a spectacle to behold in a place most people have never heard of.

After the giant puppets, my most vivid memory of Bread and Puppet was from the museum of folk art which including posters created by the community of artists.

One particular poster took me aback. It said: "Art is not important."

"What could that possibly mean?" I thought to myself.

I spotted someone in a paint-spattered shirt and ripped jeans who looked they were working there.

"What does that poster mean," I asked them, "The one that says 'Art is not important.'?"

"Well," they replied, "if art is important, it is done by experts with great care so that it can be truly appreciated, not to mention sold for a large amount. This art is cheap. It can be done by most anybody. It's simple yet powerful. And anyone can afford it. I don't take my art too seriously, which is what I love about it."

Over 20 years later, I wish I could take myself, including my spiritual life, less seriously.

I have been thinking lately about how unimportant this shelter-in-place situation can feel.

At times it seems pointless and yet maybe there's power in the pointlessness.

I just finished reading the 1978 book "Merton's Palace of Nowhere."

Author James Finley lived as a contemplative for six years at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Tennessee with the author and monk Thomas Merton as his mentor.

As Finley describes it, to be contemplative doesn't mean being pious, and it doesn't mean sitting around pondering the meaning of the universe.

To be a contemplative is to enter a place of solitude, to be still, to abide in silence, to practice letting go of the things we think define us – what Merton calls the “false self.”

We let go of the false self so that we might create a kind of spacious emptiness to discover our true self, the shy and furtive inner self which always presents itself to us as a gift from God rather than the result of our own searching.

In this sermon, I want to attempt a contemplative reading of the story known as “The road to Emmaus.

And I want to begin with the premise that prayer is not important, the spiritual life is not important, religion is not important.

Merton once described the false self as a great sturdy tower with a majestic bell in it. The tower is impressive, and the bell rings out at regular intervals throughout the day. The true self is like a small tree that grows in the shadow of that tower.

It is unassuming, unimpressive, unimportant.

To be a contemplative is to leave the tower and tend to the tree.

But, Merton warns, we must not come to the tree as a lumberjack.

We don’t come to cut it down so that we can make use of it.

It is unimportant and useless in this sense.

We come to the tree to behold it for what it is.

On this Sunday following the 50th anniversary of the first Earth Day, we might consider viewing the earth from a contemplative frame.

If we see the earth as a resource to exploit, we will exploit it.

If we see the earth for what it is, a gift whose value is in its givenness, rather than in its usefulness, we just might save it.

II. Jesus on the Road

In Luke’s gospel, on the day of resurrection, Jesus goes for a walk.

On a minor road to a small village, Jesus comes alongside two disciples that Luke has never mentioned before.

And only one of them has a name – Cleopas. The other one remains nameless.

The story of the road to Emmaus has become so familiar to many of us that it is easy to overlook the strangeness of this episode.

Why, of all the places he could go, and of all the people to whom he could appear, would Jesus, now risen, appear to these nobodies on a road to a since forgotten village?

And not only that. When the two disciples see Jesus, he appears to them as a stranger, literally as a “resident foreigner,” an immigrant, someone immediately recognizable as “other.”

This is such an odd episode until we remember the way the Gospel of Luke began, with an announcement by angels to a bunch of nobodies taking care of sheep in a field in the middle of the night.

Earlier this week, I met Jesus on Fulton Ave.

As is my morning ritual, I was walking on the path next to Piner Creek.

Ahead of me was a group of four veterans who walk together every day – I assume they live together.

As I approached them I pulled up my face covering over my mouth and nose.

We exchanged good mornings and I tried to stay as far to my side of the path as I could without sliding down the embankment.

After passing them I looked ahead to the bridge that crosses Fulton Avenue.

I noticed a person walking north on the sidewalk holding a basketball.

Glancing at me, they stopped and leaned against the bridge railing.

“Is that person looking at me?” I thought. “Am I going to have enough room to get around them?”

As I got close, I realize they were looking right at me. I felt a bit awkward and made a wide circle around them as I walked by.

“Hey man,” they said with something of an accent. It sounded like English wasn’t their first language. Their clothes looked dirty and worn.

“Yeah?” I said. To be honest I felt a bit bothered. What does this person want?

“Hey man. I don’t like to see you like that,” they said, “With your head down, looking all sad. You should look up and smile. You’ll be okay.”

“Thanks man,” I said, and continued on my way.

It wasn’t until a couple of minutes later, as I thought about this story of the Road to Emmaus, that I thought, O <expletive>, that was Jesus.

III. What They Missed

When Jesus came alongside Cleopas and the other one on their road to Emmaus, they were talking.

As if to emphasize a point, Luke tells us they were talking *and* discussing.

That’s when Jesus showed up, right in the midst of their ponderous chatter.

“What are you talking about?” Jesus asked them, which is hilarious of course.

At the posing of the question, the two of them stopped still, looking sad.

The grief and bewilderment of the past three days weighed heavily on them.

They couldn’t believe this stranger is asking such a question.

“We’re talking about the the things everyone is talking about.”

“What things?” Jesus asks. Another hilarious line.

And so, they run through the story: “Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet, was crucified, even though we had hoped he would be the one to set Israel free once and for all.”

"Then this morning some women of our group came from the tomb telling some fishy story about the stone being rolled away and two angels appearing saying that he was still alive."

"Nobody believed them but some went back and found the tomb empty, just like the women said it was, but nobody has seen Jesus since."

The most hilarious part of this story, of course, is that these two disciples are looking at Jesus right now.

But they don't recognize him.

In all of their chatter and worry and pondering they don't recognize the one who is standing right in front of them.

It reminds me a bit of church folk.

In church life, we spend so much time thinking and talking about God that we fail to notice the ways in which God is present in every ordinary moment.

We spend so much time discussing who Jesus was or is that we don't take the time to recognize him in a strange person talking to us right now.

We spend so much energy talking about spirituality while dedicating little toward living a life in the Spirit.

Jesus calls the two disciples "foolish."

I think this is Luke's way of preaching to his own community, and to our community.

Cleopas is a shortened masculine version of the name Cleopatra, which means "celebration of the Father."

I think that, for Luke, Cleopas is any Christian, anyone who sees themselves as a worshiper of God.

And what about the anonymous disciple?

I think they are, for Luke, a stand in for everybody and nobody, a door by which any of us can insert ourselves into the story.

Foolish is what Jesus calls Cleopas and the other one, foolish and "slow of heart."

They were talking, talking, talking, but they were not paying attention to their other organ of knowing, the heart.

So he speaks to their hearts, reminds them that it is only by suffering and letting go and creating an empty space that the Messiah could "enter into his glory," which means to fill the world with his presence.

We are foolish when we want to write suffering out of the story.

We write suffering out of the story when we either deny suffering or romanticize it.

The two disciples missed the meaning of the cross, forgot that the cross was necessary for resurrection.

I want to pause here to observe that feminist and womanist theologians have warned against glorifying suffering for its own sake.

Throughout history, marginalized and vulnerable people, often women, have been expected to bear the cross of abuse or discrimination or exploitation in the name of the greater good.

Such an expectation does violence to those God loves and seeks to protect.

This is not what it means to say that the cross is necessary for resurrection.

Resurrection is the affirmation of those who, like Jesus, have suffered at the hands of unjust systems.

Resurrection is the vindication of the oppressed, a word of life spoken in the face of violence and death.

What the disciples on the road to Emmaus were missing in their grief was that the cross is not the end of the story, to be denied or explained away.

On the cross, the Messiah became nothing so that God could become all in all for all.

On the cross, Jesus emptied himself of all pretense so that his spirit, God's Spirit, could fill the earth.

Jesus' death freed him from others' expectations of who he was and created a fertile void for God to become everything.

Emptying is necessary for filling, like lungs breathing out and breathing in.

The false self and its attachments must be let go of so the true self can be found.

Luke's first post-resurrection appearance is by an unrecognizable Jesus to a couple of nobodies on a minor road to a forgotten village.

This story is not important. That's what I love about it.

IV. Known in the Breaking

As the story goes, Cleopas and the other disciple arrive with the stranger in Emmaus.

Jesus is about to wave goodbye when they invite him to stay for supper.

There is a painting by Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velasquez that depicts the supper from a unique vantage point.

The painting is sometimes called the "The Moorish Maid." A Moor is a Muslim.

(Side note: Our Muslim neighbors began Ramadan, their month of fasting, at sunset last Thursday.)

The primary character in Velazquez's painting is a dark-skinned young woman in the kitchen.

Over her right shoulder are three figures, the two disciples and their strange guest who is in the process of lifting and breaking bread.

But the power of the painting is not in the background, but in the foreground.

The young woman's posture and facial expression speak volumes.

Her face is a mixture of awe and disbelief, her head turned slightly to overhear the conversation in the next room.

With her right hand she steadies herself at the table where she is standing, her left hand on the handle of a pitcher.

I can scarcely describe the painting without feeling the same awe that I see on the young woman's face.

She, a nobody, a serving girl, a foreigner, a minority, a Moor in Christian Spain, is in a position to recognize the identity of the guest before the disciples do.

In his painting, Velasquez privileges the unimportant person.

In his Gospel, Luke privileges the poor and unassuming.

The paradox of Emmaus is that the disciples saw Jesus on the road while they were talking but did not recognize him.

They were "slow of heart."

But when they finally recognized him, in the breaking of the bread, he disappeared from their sight.

And it was then they realized, "He was with us all along. Were not our hearts burning within us?"

From "slow of heart" to "hearts burning within."

A rabbi friend of mine once observed: "Bread can only be shared once it is broken."

Resurrection can only happen after crucifixion.

New life comes when the old life is gone.

The true self emerges when the false self crumbles.

And Jesus shows up all the time when you're not paying attention.

Amen.