

One of the joys of seminary was having instant community around you. With dormitory style living there was ALWAYS a fellow student awake, willing to sit and talk about what we were learning in the classroom. One night it was late and a small group of us got into a discussion about our understandings of God; it quickly became clear we did not all agree. We were close friends but we were going at each other, debating faith, church and God. Sound familiar to anyone?

We had argued late into the evening; arguing turned to frustration, frustration felt like it was coming to a breaking point, perhaps even a breaking point in some of our friendships. Finally someone said, “Would anyone mind if I offered us a little pretzel, a sip, and a prayer... as a sort of communion, to remind us that through our differences we still share a common foundation in Christ.”

The blood pressure of the group relaxed and we all agreed to participate. One person joked that being at a school founded by German Immigrants, it was appropriate we were sharing an wheat and hop beverage with pretzels as a sort of “German Communion.” We laughed and then we shared a very short, simple communion service. After that night, our group still got together, we still argued, but through our arguing we recognized a bond that held us together which was greater than our differences. One of the people in that group would eventually introduce me to Ann. We helped each other studying for exams and wrote references for our first Ministerial Profiles. Still today, even when we have been apart for years, we get together and pick up right where we left off.

Today we meet two people on the road to Emmaus. One named Cleopas and the other is unnamed. While in the church we celebrated Easter two weeks ago, the Emmaus story occurs on the early evening of Easter Day. So everything about Jesus’s resurrection has just happened and it is still confusing, mysterious, and to many... unbelievable.

In this story, I find an invitation for us to examine our own journey of faith. If we truly believe no matter who you are, or where you are on the journey of faith, you are welcome here. Then, where are you and I? What is the next stage we might challenge ourself to move into? What type of foundation does Christ’s resurrection provide for our daily living? I invite us to look at faith this morning as a developmental process; not something you have or you don’t have.

In the first stage, we know the story of Jesus’ resurrection but we are skeptical. The story of the empty tomb doesn’t make sense to us, we get stuck on how a body, pronounced medically dead, can actually come alive again? The story just doesn’t fit with our science, our logic, even our experiences which cause us to wonder -- why didn’t my friend or family member become resurrected?

In the first stage, we want to believe, but the story itself presents obstacles on our spiritual path. Let me assure you there are many, dedicated volunteers and leaders in churches that are in this first stage of faith, but are a part of their local church for many other important reasons.

The story then reveals a little deeper stage of faith we might call stage two? In stage two we see the disciples going to Emmaus and they are joined by someone they don't recognize. They tell the stranger the events that have unfolded, how Jesus was a prophet mighty in word and deed, and how they had hoped Jesus was the savior.

Essentially the two disciples evangelize. They tell how Jesus was crucified, share the report of the empty tomb and the announcement that he has risen from the grave. In stage 2 we understand God has done something wonderful for someone, perhaps long ago. But in stage 2 faith we have trouble telling the story as OUR story. It is still Jesus' story, we have not yet been able to name the ways we have died to old ways of living and been born again to new ways in Christ. In, stage 2, the story of Jesus' resurrection is Good News but it doesn't open us to transformation.

Then on the road to Emmaus we encounter stage 3 faith. We, like the disciples, don't recognize Jesus in the "other," but we know it is our role to invite the stranger to stay with us. We know Christians are supposed to extend the gift of Hospitality to a stranger, like Jesus would. So in our story the disciples offer their visitor food and a place to stay, but it is offered in a Hotel Concierge sort of way, without preparation for any real relationship.

I remember a congregation I served for a couple years. Very faithful folks, strong worship attenders, and they were always ready to give to support worthy causes for the needy. They would donate clothes, money, food. They were generous stewards, but when they were asked to take the donations to the city, no one volunteered. When they were asked to put a small team together to organize food in a food pantry in a poor neighborhood, no one would volunteer. An honest member later told me, "Every congregation has different gifts Pastor, we are a wealthy congregation and our gift is to give money."

Next would be stage 4 faith. I imagine by now you see these developing. I am suggesting that through the journey with Christ, we have the opportunity to grow into new stages of faith. But this doesn't happen by accident. It takes risk and courage.

In stage 4 we are ready to sit down and share a meal with a new friend. We want to develop relationship but it is scary. Still, we overcome our fear, we put ourselves in God's hands, and we allow the visitor to share in the leadership of our gathering. Luke tells us, after all this time walking and talking, preparing a meal, the visitor moves from guest to host. The visitor takes bread, blesses and breaks it and offers it to them... and THEN the two disciples recognize it is Jesus with them. Now they review the journey and see how Christ has been inviting them into relationship all along. They remember how willing they were to share the good news of resurrection with him. They remember their hearts burning within them when the stranger was

teaching them on the road. In retrospect, they begin to see how Christ has been with them all along.

That is Stage 5. My guess is no one really attains stage 5 permanently. Faith development likely works like a spiral for most of us, where, different circumstances cause us to move from less to more confidence in God, and back again.

Stage 5 is set aside for moments... moments we feel fully assured of the truth of the gospel, moments we find ourselves comfortable and relaxed sharing good news with strangers, moments we offer hospitality without fear of our own security, moments when—whether at our communion table or somewhere else—we experience the broken bread and poured out wine and we know we have met God again in intimate ways. In this stage we are free to sing without reserve, “what a friend we have in Jesus,” free to sing “Fairest Lord Jesus,” free to sing “because he lives I can face tomorrow, because he lives, all fear is gone.”

By stage 5, if not before, we find ourselves deeply connecting faith to what is happening in the world and in our country. We may be stunned to find ourselves writing a letter to a representative or marching in a rally, or talking to our school or workplace about diversity curriculums, or challenging our neighbors’ racism or homophobia. By stage 5 we begin seeing Christ in everyone; comrade and enemy, friend and stranger, the one we agree with and the one who holds opposing views every step of the way; everyone. I think stage 5 only happens in bits and moments. But what we see in our story today, is once Jesus blessed and broke the bread, the disciples recognized him. As I like to say, once he did something Jesus-y, the other 2 realized he had been with them all along.

Jesus had been with these two travelers for hours and they didn’t recognize him. As you review where you might be along the 5 stages... consider a fundamental truth of the story of the Emmaus road...

Jesus was with them when they needed him, even when they didn’t realize it. Through their doubts, their confusion, their fears, their disappointment... he had been with them every step of the way. And as we grow in faith, in a fear filled world; might we open our hearts to find where Christ is with us, especially in those times we don’t immediately recognize him.

Amen