

Poignancy and Possibility

How are you doing?

I have been so encouraged by all that you are doing and trying. What I am seeing through my online meetings with others, phone calls and read often through emails is that a great sense of creativity, resiliency and faithfulness has been grasped by so many and I thank you for that. It is so encouraging to hear, share in and be told about.

And all of this made me think about Luke 24: 13-35 'On the Road to Emmaus'.

I am struck that there is also a fair amount of creativity, resiliency, and faithfulness on display here as well. Luke, certainly, exercises considerable creativity in crafting and sharing a story none of the other Evangelists include. And in that story, two disciples are renewed in their faith by their encounter with Jesus and granted the resiliency to turn around and head back the seven miles to Jerusalem to share word of their encounter even though it was now evening.

'The Road to Emmaus' is a familiar and, for many of us, favourite story.

This year, however, it is also a poignant one. I've long thought that Luke crafted this story to point his readers – persons who likely had never met or seen Jesus – to Sunday worship as the place where they would be encountered by the Risen Lord and have their hearts warmed by faith and fellowship.

For surely it is no accident that the four parts of the story – Jesus meeting them amid their journey, interpreting Scripture, giving thanks and breaking bread, and then departing again for witness – model so closely the ancient and dominant pattern of worship that

includes gathering, Word, meal, and sending. What is poignant, of course, is that we will not physically experience this rhythm this week... or perhaps have now for many weeks. And to hear Luke describe it is, quite honestly, a bit painful in the middle of our social distancing and isolation.

And yet amid this poignancy I find three elements of profound possibility, and I hope these may buoy you in faith this week.

First, I am struck once again that Jesus meets the disciples on the road. This is more than a symbolic representation of the gathering rites of our worship, this is an actual promise that Jesus always meets us where we are, whether in celebration or mourning, whether in victory or defeat, whether in gladness or sorrow, whether in times of health or sickness or even pandemic. We are on a journey... as congregations, as leaders, as Christians, and as a society – both nationally and globally – and Jesus regularly shows up midway through the journey, while we're still on the road, to encourage us, accept us, and embolden us.

Second, while I typically read the story of the meal that the disciples and Jesus share as representing Communion – compare the description of Jesus at the Last Supper and that here (22:19, 24:30) – it occurs me now that's not a necessary the conclusion to reach. (And interestingly, Luke uses the same words to describe Jesus' feeding of the multitude: 9:16.)

To put this another way, I think that this meal (and all of our meals, for that matter!) may be sacramental – that is, holding the potential to mediate the grace and presence of God – without necessarily being a sacrament.

The remarkable amount of writing in recent weeks about whether and how to share communion during shelter-at-home periods – some of it quite helpful, some less so – has given me pause to

wonder whether we have in recent years over-emphasised the Sacraments.

Again, I'm not sure I'm saying this well.

I come from a sacramental tradition and highly value the promises of salvation physically embodied in baptism and communion and commanded by Jesus to encourage us in faith. But perhaps our emphasis on the sacraments – and particularly our at-times rabid concern with getting it *Right* – has overshadowed the potential of everyday events, occurrences, and people to be powerful reminders and even mediators of God's promises and presence.

Can we invite people to see the meals they share at home, as well as alone, or the online fellowship they enjoy via Snapchattting with each other or through a Zoom happy hour, or the additional time they are spending with those closest to them (some of that time joyful and some, honestly, painful) as places where God is still showing up, still reminding us that we are loved, still promising to meet us where we are and accompany us all along the way? Perhaps it is time to set some of ourselves free to read and interpret the Bible on their own and to share and claim sacramental moments at home, as God continues to meet us in the ordinary and mundane elements of life, often where we least expect God to be, making promises to ordinary and mundane people that we are beloved children of God.

Third, I'm encouraged by the fact that it takes a number of people in the New Testament a fair amount of time to recognize Jesus.

Whether it's Nicodemus in John's story – introduced in chapter three, but not demonstrating any particular faith until he declares himself for Jesus by burying him in chapter nineteen... Or whether it's all four Gospels reporting the standard reaction of dismay, confusion, doubt and disbelief by the disciples as a whole when

word of Jesus' resurrection reaches them... Or whether it's that Cleopas and his companion simply don't recognize Jesus until he blesses and breaks bread with them.... I am encouraged by these delayed professions of faith. Sometimes, faith comes easy. At others, faith can be pretty damn hard and Jesus remarkably difficult to recognize.

Either way, Jesus is there, waiting patiently for those he has already called. And that may be just the thing to tell folks who may very well be struggling to see Jesus right now.

There is lots in this story to ponder and proclaim, some of it quite poignant, even painful, but nevertheless it is important to give it a voice. But other elements of the story – and I'd be bold enough to say more elements – are just brimming with the resurrection possibilities of the God we know in Jesus, and this is important to give voice to as well. Thank you for your proclamation, for your faith, and for taking care of yourself so that you can take care of others.

Every blessing,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David". The script is cursive and fluid.

Rev. David Willis