

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, April 23, 2023 // Easter 3, Year A

The Gospel: Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of Jesus' disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Background and general observations

The story of Jesus appearing to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus occurs only in the Gospel according to Luke. It follows Luke's story about the discovery of the empty tomb, in which several women have gone to the tomb with spices. They find the stone rolled away from the tomb, but they do not find the body of Jesus. And while they are perplexed, two men in dazzling clothes appear to them and ask why they are seeking the living among the dead. The women report all of this to the other disciples, who dismiss their story as an idle tale, but Peter goes to the tomb to check things out himself. When he finds things as the women had reported, he simply walks away amazed. (Luke 24:1-12)

In Luke's gospel, therefore, the encounter on the road to Emmaus is the first recorded encounter with the risen Jesus. At the conclusion of this story about the Emmaus encounter, we see Cleopas and the other disciple

reporting what they have experienced to the eleven apostles. (vv. 33-35) The very next verse reads, “While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

The story about the walk to Emmaus is a helpful reminder to us that we are always traveling with each other and with Christ (often seemingly hidden or disguised), and that sometimes it is necessary to stop and join in attentive hospitality with each other, in order for our eyes to be opened and for the events of our lives to fall into place, or become clear, or gain meaning. The truths that God teaches us may not always be understood at first, and we rely on the companionship of each other, and of Christ, in order to see what is not always visible and to unveil what might be obscured.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. “While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Many people note that when we are confused, depressed, or anxious, we are not likely to sense God’s presence and activity in our lives; in other words, our eyes are kept from seeing and we are, in a sense, blind to certain truths because of our suffering. This particular blindness might be especially acute when we have been treated poorly, or been disappointed, or when we realize we have fallen short of our own expectations, or somehow failed other people. However, quite often in hindsight, we can look back on such difficult times in our lives and see how God in fact was present and at work, even though we were kept from seeing so at the time.

What do you know about this from your own life? What do you know about the experience of not recognizing the Divine Presence in your midst? What are some of the things that hinder you from seeing what God desires you to see?

An interesting exercise might be to think about a particularly difficult time in your life, a time that you have perhaps tried to forget. Close your eyes and call that scene or situation back to your mind, allowing that troubling time to come to life again in your imagination. As you observe the scene unfolding, imagine where Jesus was at the time. What was Jesus doing? What was he feeling? What might he be trying to say to you?

2. This story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus should remind all of us that Jesus promised he would be with us always. And though it is sometimes easy to lose sight of how and where Christ is present in certain situations (particularly difficult ones), it is helpful to stop, return our attention to God, and ask ourselves, “Where is Christ now?” It almost always makes a difference.

You might try this for yourself at various times in your day, and particularly when you are feeling perplexed or anxious or angry. Notice what the effect is, for you, of pausing and wondering in this way.

3. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him...”

This story of the road to Emmaus further illuminates the idea that we are most likely to recognize, discover, or encounter God in tangible acts of love and hospitality. As they came near the village, the disciples urged Jesus to stay with them, another gesture of generosity that leads to truth. (Their invitation that Jesus stay leads them to the sharing of a meal which, in turn, leads

to the disciples' ability to see clearly.) It isn't too difficult, then, especially with this story as our example, to understand better that phrase from the first chapter of John: "God is love."

When has love been a catalyst for encountering God in your life? Can you think of other examples—either from your own life or from scripture—that illustrate ways in which "God is love"?

4. The sacrament of Holy Communion has been precious to Christians for more than 2,000 years. It's a reminder of the abiding presence of God within us and among us. The Lord's Supper is essential to our faith and in consuming the body and blood of Christ we are sustained, inspired, and strengthened.

What do you know personally about experiencing the presence of God in the sacrament of Holy Communion?

Cooking for one another or simply sharing a meal is one of our culture's fundamental expressions of hospitality, kinship, and generosity. Has there been a time when a routine family dinner or lunch with a friend felt especially attuned to the spirit of God? Or, have you had a mealtime experience that has reminded you of what you may have been too distracted to see? That God's presence is there always, not only at every meal but at every moment of your life?

5. The story of the road to Emmaus is the story of a journey that is filled with discussion of Scripture and life experiences. It is a journey that concludes with kindness, hospitality, a meal, and then a sudden revelation, an epiphany. As the disciples look back on the journey, they comment that their hearts were burning within them.

How is their journey similar to yours? What do you see in their walking to Emmaus that reminds you of your own spiritual journey? What is the role of telling your life's story to others, of discussing the Bible, of having a sense of gradual but growing understanding? What role do acts of kindness play in the story of your journey? What do you know about unexpected clarity or sudden revelation?