

April 26, 2020 -- The Road to Emmaus: Luke 24:13-35

The most profound recognition of the Living Lord that I remember was in 1974 when I was a mental health intern at the Alton State Hospital. There were hundreds of patients who were being treated. The success rate or dismissal rate was almost none. Patients at that time lived there until the end of their life. As a counselor, I could not perceive much improvement in these residents who were medicated to keep themselves and the staff safe. As I was taking a lunch break in the office, I was very frustrated with my ability to make any progress with the hapless souls in my charge. This was about the same time I was taking the teachings of Jesus the Christ seriously. I had just finished reading Matthew 25 in the "Good News for Modern Man" translation. It spoke of "what we do for the least of these, we do for Jesus."

I looked up and a young man in his twenties had come into my office. Besides having Down's Syndrome, there were other disabilities that plagued him. I looked up and the Spirit caused me to ask the question of the young man: "Are you the Christ?" "You betcha" was his quick reply and I could never find him again even though I searched diligently. This encounter totally changed my life and my ministry forever! For me, recognizing the Christ was to see Him in anyone who was lost, in pain or suffering. The Sub sandwich was the breaking of the bread that accompanied this mystical recognition. Since that time, I look for the Christ in any human being that stands or sits before me.

Cleopas and his unnamed companion didn't recognize Jesus the Christ as they walked down the road with Him in our Gospel narrative. The text reads that "they were kept from recognizing Him." We are not told who or what kept them from seeing Jesus. This presents the ultimate theological question for all of us. What keeps us from seeing the Christ today? Jesus told His disciples exactly what was going to happen to Him on Good Friday and Easter Sunday many times. He would quote the Hebrew Bible prophets who foreshadowed what the Messiah would look like and the circumstances of His arrival. "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory." To be honest, I am not sure that any of us were expecting the Christ that we got. It seems to me that the case of mistaken identity comes easily in reading Genesis through Malachi. There is a great deal of language which describes the Messiah in the same terms as King David, but His reign would be forever. In our American wealth and success-oriented culture we too are deceived by external power and beauty. And while Jesus would tell us that he would send us "the Paraclete," literally, the one who walks beside us, our eyes are often kept from seeing Him.

In native American rights of passage rituals, the adolescent brave is left in the forest for a night by himself. When the initiate awakes, he discovers that his father was present all night, watching over the young brave. Our Lord is very much like that. Always caring and concerned. We are often too distracted and too busy to perceive His presence. The peace that we are provided in Christ has been given to us through the cross. Peter would write that this peace with the Father has been made forever. This peace is beyond "mere silver or gold" but provided for us in the precious sacrifice of our Savior. Father God did not change His mind about us but in Jesus the Son, He showed the world how much He has always loved His children. When did the good news of this unconditional love become another horror story of a wrathful, vengeful, deity who is out to inflict hell and damnation upon us if we slip up? Have

we come any farther than Shakespeare's Julius Caesar who would say: "the gods despise us--they swat us like flies for their sport."

From the annals of World War Two comes the narrative of Ernie Pyle who would write about a German POW. When the prisoner arrived, he feared that the Americans would torture him and mistreat him. Instead, the new prisoner was treated kindly and given soap, a toothbrush, a razor and really good food. Isn't this our situation, we have been taught about wrath and "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." We fear the Father with a clip board who is always judging and dangling us atop hell. Instead, we are introduced to a God in Christ who loves us more than we love ourselves. Paul would write that in Jesus the Christ, we are at last at peace with the Father. Jesus keeps saying "fear not" and "my peace I give to you." Then, the organized church keeps trying to convince us that we are "totally depraved" and we fear hell and damnation. Tom Long would write that "the God we believe in is the God that we get." Jesus the Christ is the God that gives us a peace "untouched by fortune" so that we can treat success or failure as the imposters that they are. This peace comes from a Savior who says, "in this world you will have troubles, but I have overcome the world."

Our eyes have to be open and we have to be wide awake to recognize this blessed Messiah and what He has done for us! The world is such a beautiful creation with so many distractions, that things keep us from seeing the true reality of God's love and a peace beyond even His blessings. "On Sunday morning in contemporary America, modern disciples come straggling through the church door weighed down by cynicism, stress and strife. We are too busy to recognize the risen Christ." (Susan Andrews.) We seek Him in our continuous prayers and scripture reading. If we can turn our glances and attention to the Lord instead of His earthly benefits, we are promised an intimacy that can only be experienced and not described by the walls of words: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them and they with me." Just a little bit of effort to listen for the "still small voice" in quiet retreats will yield wonderful intimacy and results. Saint Teresa of Calcutta would speak of finding the "distressed face of Christ" in everyone and doing small acts of kindness with "great love in our hearts." J.J. Audubon once said: "Unless you can find a beautiful bird in your heart, you will never see her with your eyes." A recently deceased sports photographer used to say: "You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus!" This is really, really good news! We are always afforded an intimacy and a love from the Father through the Son if only we make a decision and have the desire for this perfect peace. Once we have experienced this for ourselves, we organically can't help but want to share it with others. It's not about fearing hell and wanting to dodge damnation, it's about feeling in our hearts how much we are loved. To quote the Mercedes Benz commercial: "Because in life, some things are just too important not to share."

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