

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
April 30, 2017

“Surprise for the Slow of Heart”

“... Jesus said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are,
and how slow of heart to believe all the prophets have declared.
Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things
and then enter into his glory?’”

L:uke 24:25-26

PRELUDE

Our scripture lesson this morning
is a fascinating account of an Easter
revelation experienced by two disciples
making their way from Jerusalem
to a village named Emmaus.

The two, one of whom is named Cleopus,
were engaged in deep conversation, when
they were joined by a third. Luke tells us,
**“Jesus himself came near
and went with them,
but their eyes were kept
from recognizing him.”**

We aren’t given to know the duration
of the journey they shared; we know the
distance between Jerusalem
and Emmaus - 7 miles is noted in the
text - which is a translated equivalent
of 60 “stadia” - a Greek term measuring
distance. But the time that was shared
is quite vague. We are left with the
impression that they were in the dark
for some time.

Jesus asked, **“What’s going on fellows?”**
which brought the walk to a stop and the
conversation to a halt.

I’m not certain that is exactly what Jesus said.
It is more of a guess, as close an estimate as
the verse we find in the KJV:

**“What manner of communications
are these that ye have one to another,
as ye walk...”** This is Jesus talk in
Elizabethan English, which is quaint, but not
so conceivable as it was once upon a time.

We read:

“They stood still, looking sad” (NRSV, Luke 24:17).

They stopped, looking downcast,
their faces, as described by
the New English Bible,
“full of gloom.”

They were dejected.

Yet then, surprised by the
the naiveté they sensed in the one
with whom they were walking:

**“Are you the only stranger
in Jerusalem who does not know
the things that have taken place ...
these past few days?”**

Jesus displays remarkable patience.
He asks **“what things,”** and then lets
Cleopas and his companion process,
explain, speak of all that has unfolded
for the followers of Jesus,
the different reports of encounters,
the wonderful report of the women
 who had visited the tomb,
 who reported seeing a visions of angels,
 who reported the crucified Jesus was risen,

and alive and loose in the world.

When Jesus again speaks, it is with intent that Cleopas and his fellow traveler integrate - that they incorporate - Jesus teaching in their lives.

They are, in fact, surprised a second time (resurrection always comes as a surprise, doesn't it?).

Though "**slow of heart**" to believe, Jesus - the one they see as stranger, the one their eyes were kept from recognizing - has been with them all the while. Can you imagine?

This is where I'd like to focus for a just a moment this morning - these two disciples, who are up to speed seemingly on all there is to know concerning Jesus of Nazareth, "**mighty prophet in word and deed,**" condemned and crucified, reported risen, yet stuck in sadness, suspended in belief; they are commiserating companions, fixed in a state they can't - on their own- extricate themselves.

Jesus is with them.
But they see dimly (I Corinthians 13:12).
They are "**slow of heart**" in coming to the realization -
Jesus has been helping them,
walking and talking with them,
all the while.

I don't know if most of us or many of us can relate to these two; I do know I can personally identify with Cleopas and his companion, who have a pretty good grasp of what's going

on, yet know all they know - about intriguing people and powers that hold sway in the world, they are at best slow of heart to believe.

Belief - not as confession of a creed, but as consent of the heart, so as to act and to be engaged from a grounding conviction - belief does not come easy.

This is true - at least for me.

I can spend a lot of time
 idling with the reluctant;
I can see in me the desire
to worship without being inconvenienced
 by a love that is greater than my own;
to want refuge and rest
 without altering my
 dim-witted ways.

What is most remarkable about this lesson, Jesus lingers, Jesus stays, Jesus works with these two “**slow of heart**” disciples, until they are surprised, till their eyes are opened, and they discover Jesus in their company. And then, poof, we read that Jesus vanished from their sight. What a strange thing to read (see Luke 24:31).

Yet the vision - their “seeing” - becomes Life-defining; their course is altered. Their gloom is lifted. The “scales” fall. They rise, reverse course, and return to the community where they report what had happened to them on the road.

I hope we can see what grace
is operational in this story.
For the “slow of heart” it takes but an instance
for a life to be altered and unmistakably restored
when one is awakened to the Presence
with them all the while.

Though it may be years in the making,
with many paces along life’s stadia,
it takes but an instance for an
authentic encounter with Jesus
to alter one’s course for good.
It is the love of Jesus,
the patience of Jesus,
the suffering of Jesus (suffering our sin)
that enables such grace to surprise.

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We need such encounters, do we not,
to push us further along down the road
to our being reconciled with all the
bruising disappointments of life that
mount up in our lives, to help us navigate
with all the sorrow and sadness that
complicates our lives.

And the source of so much friction in our lives,
Regrettably, is the church, a church so variously
configured, so quick to judge deficits,
so otherworldly to be no earthly good,
often displaying the conceit
it faults in others,
often forsaking the
patience and understanding
the “slow of heart” require in order
to rise in a life of faith.

What was it Jesus once said
about specks and logs; that hypocrites

can detect a defective speck in the
eye of some other, and be blind
to the log that impairs one's own
ability to see, to perceive, to understand.
The church has a radar for specks;
log detection is underdeveloped.

This morning in our worship, a central
focus is upon our need for healing.
We know about sorrow and sadness
caused by moody presidents and other
fickle politicians, log-jammed congressmen,
whose concern is limited to their own kind.
But we can't deny the role religious
sentiments and teaching has caused
resulting in deep grief and pain.

When the church fails to advocate for
earthcare - it is serving as an
institutional public nuisance.

When the church is silent
on racially unjust -
it is broadcasting deafening volumes
about crucifying the people
Jesus died to save,
with whom Jesus
delights to lodge.

When the church makes haste to
label LBGTQ brothers and sisters
as defective, as imperfectly constituted
in the image of God, it is savaging the
brilliance of God's capacity to make
every man/woman/child singularly unique.

When the church refrains from
advocating for human rights,
it fuels human wrongs.

When the church fails to provide
welcome and to show genuine care
and kindly concern, it refutes its calling,
and buries its hope of signaling
God's new creation.

There is no greater judgment to be
pronounced by a people upon the
church than this:
it left me cold and lonely.
I could find no meaning-full company.
in its circle.

Have you been surprised lately?
Have you been surprised by life?
It was Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)
who once said:

**“I meant to write about death,
only life came breaking in as usual.”**

Cleopus and his companion had experienced
overwhelming disappointment - they needed
the surprise of an encounter with their Risen
Leader to recoup - they needed the Jesus
who was patient with their slowness
and sadness. And he lingered -
as long as was necessary for them
to come to their senses, to step
beyond their misery,
to have their hearts set on fire -
with grace, and love and mercy.
I hope we hold onto to such hope,
and maintain high expectations
for God to provide healing
for all that limits us, that weights us,
that keeps us less than the whole God desires.

A final word. Pope Francis paid a visit to Egypt this past week. And share worship with Coptic Christians, an ancient expression in the land that was a cradle for Christian faith. The Coptic Christians are a suffering church - suffering violence at the hands of extremists - faithful fundamentalists with log jammed eyes.

In his preaching Francis spoke of true faith - true faith that leads believers to **“protect the rights others with the same zeal and enthusiasm with which we defend our own. The only fanaticism believers can have is that of charity. Any other ... does not come from God and is not pleasing ...”**

As a church community, let us hold fast to this gospel power and its promise. Let us pray that we might gain what Jesus has to give, a tender heart, full of mercy, full of grace, full of peace.

Encounters with Jesus come to restore a fullness of our humanity; encounters with Jesus come - even for the slow of heart - that we might have a heart like that of God, full of grace, mercy, and peace. When you see such a heart - in the Christian, the Jew, the Muslim, in the Hindu, that Buddhist, in the none, it is unmistakable. It is pleasing. And healing.

May such grace abound, and as we each have need, may we find ourselves surprised and blessed. Amen.

(Sermons are typically composed in haste, for the demands of the day are many; so be charitable as you read; and remember: the contents of this sermon have not been edited and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)