

The Third Sunday of Easter (Easter 3A) – May 4, 2014
Acts 2:14a, 36-47; Psalm 116:10-17; I Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Of the seven stories in the gospels where the Risen Jesus appears, Luke is the only gospel writer to tell us what happened on this seven-mile stretch of road from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus, a few days after Jesus' crucifixion. But even though Luke is the only one who records this, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out,

“everyone has walked [that road] at one time or another. It's the road you walk when your team has lost [or] your candidate has been defeated, [or when] your loved one has died [or left]—the long road back [alone] to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again. It's the road of deep disappointment, and walking it is the living definition of [loss, grief and sadness], just like the two in today's [gospel]. It takes hours to walk seven miles, and that is how long they have to talk over the roller coaster of events of the past three days: the trial, the crucifixion, the silent procession to the tomb. And then the women's vision of angels, and the empty [tomb]...and rumors of resurrection.”ⁱ

These two are talking it all over when Jesus comes up behind them. Their whole frame of mind at this point was that Jesus was as dead as a doornail, and in their minds this person they meet on the road now walking with them was a stranger—creating for them a kind of “cognitive dissonance” as modern psychology might put it. They just weren't looking for a dead man on that journey back to Emmaus.

Now Jesus connects with these two by stepping right into their cadence and walking with them—beside them—not apart from them, nor right in their faces. He enters into their lives as they are, into their grief and remorse. He is relational.ⁱⁱ Their conversation isn't just chit-chat. Their questions even become agitated; something stirs up in them. Jesus starts by asking, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” This conversation gets him right into their story. This involves some risk on Jesus' part—they might have replied, “It's none of your business. Scram stranger!” Instead, we hear, “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?” Jesus doesn't then back off.ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, he has them work this through. He asks them to go deeper by asking, “What things?” They then tell him how things had looked so promising at first, when Jesus impressed everyone with his eloquence and mighty acts—and then how things had gone wrong, dead wrong, so that there was finally nothing left for them to do but go back home, dragging their feet in the dust. “We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel,” they say to him, admitting their defeat and sharing their grief and disappointment. “We *had* hoped...” As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, “Hope in the past tense—[is] one of the saddest sounds a human being can make. We had hoped he was the one. We believed things might really change; but we were wrong. He died. It's over now...No more illusions. It's back to business as usual.”^{iv}

Jesus waits to hear their story. Only then does he exchange his story with theirs. He takes the time to show regard and real interest in them. He isn't there just to preach to them or to figure it all out for them, or to give something to them or do something for them. Rather, he is there to re-connect with a relationship, to create a changed situation from *within* their hearts and minds so that they can come to their own realizations and awareness. That involves the art of conversation—not chit-chat, but real give and take, sharing of stories, listening as well as talking, and a bit of risk and agitation. Having listened to their stories, Jesus now tells his own story by working through the Scriptures.^v

In this exchange of stories, theirs and his, some understanding is built, and beyond that, something else happens. As Jesus and the two men arrive at Emmaus, Jesus starts to walk on ahead, heading off somewhere else. Now, most interpretations of this story have us think that *the* transformative moment, the eye-opening moment, is the moment at the end of the story when the bread was broken at dinner and the two fully recognize him as the risen Jesus. But for those of us who don't often perceive the full presence of Christ in our midst, I would argue that the moment of transformation, the eye-opening moment where change occurs, happens earlier in the story, precisely at this moment back on the road, when the two realize a relationship was being established, and when something initiatory happens—as Jesus was about to walk away, they invite him to come and stay and have dinner.^{vi} The two themselves actually give evidence that this moment on the road was the transformative moment, not only by their initiating action inviting him to dinner, but also in their later testimony: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?” In fact, there wouldn't have been any dinner together, no breaking of bread and thus no full recognition of Jesus later on, unless this earlier initiative on their part, of inviting him to dinner, had occurred.

Jesus initiates. He does not limit his post-Resurrection appearances to those with full confidence in him. He comes to the disappointed, the doubtful, those in despair. He comes to those who do not know their Bible, to those who do not recognize him even when they are walking right beside him. He comes to those who have given up and are headed back home. He comes to broken people, with broken dreams, in a broken world.

Yet, his initiation then calls forth theirs—and ours. Jesus didn't fully reveal himself to them until *they* did something out of this new relationship. It's only through their action that further insight and change occurs. That is the nature of Christ's relational and transformational way with us. God acts *and* we act. It's not just God at work; *we* also need to work with God. As St. Augustine put it, “Without God we cannot. Without us, God will not.”^{vii}

Finally, it's important to note that this initiatory action—the invitation to supper—was an act of caring, generosity and hospitality, and that through such an act came the full realization of an encounter with the Risen Lord. In my experience, that is where many encounters with the Living Lord take place. In the seemingly ordinariness of so many acts of caring each day, the extraordinary presence of the Risen Christ is often there,

hidden in plain sight. Our fundamental work as followers of the Risen Christ is to bring together people and their talents, energies (including their losses), their values and interests, to create changed situations in our lives, in the life of this church and in others' lives (as we share our lives together and with our neighborhood and city). Those changed situations come about through the power of the relationships that are built and renewed and transformed in hundreds of conversations and acts of hospitality. This can happen amongst long-time and newer members, amongst young and old, and amongst the church and wider community. And this doesn't happen so much through meetings as it does through *meeting, and real conversation*. Unfortunately, except for our most personal relationships—and even in those at times—such conversation seems to be more and more a lost art. Whether it's the fast-paced time crunch of modern work and lifestyle that has reduced human communication to sound bytes, to communication interrupted, or to instrumental transactions, i.e. talking with others merely as a means to our, or their, ends—or whether it's the lure of modern technology that enables instant communication without face-to-face encounter—we are losing the art of face-to-face conversation which has forever been a joy, a blessing, and the most basic foundation for building, renewing and transforming relationships (both private and public), as ends in themselves.^{viii} I thank God that we are a relational parish. In doing this most basic relational work in our conversations, in our acts of caring and compassion—as those three did on the road to Emmaus—we can be all the more open to know and be known by the Risen Lord in the breaking of the bread and in all the other parts of our lives. And we can also help one another to understand our losses, discern our faith and values and interests, and help build a community that truly joins the Risen Christ's ongoing mission of healing, wholeness and justice.

At the end of this gospel story, the two travelers are alone again, but it's not the aloneness with which they began their journey. A new loving and transforming bond has been created that keeps their hearts burning and leads them to build community with the others as they head right back to Jerusalem.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 20

ⁱⁱ As Lao Tzu stated, "To lead people, walk beside them."

ⁱⁱⁱ Nor does he answer by "trumping" them and coming right out and saying, "Hellooo. Do you know who you're talking with?" Jesus approaches these men on the road not in order to be right and victorious, but to be loving and transformative.

^{iv} Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 21

^v Again, as Barbara Taylor points out, they are told that—"the Christ is not the one who [was to] win [this] power struggle—he is the one who loses it. The Christ is not the undefeated Champion [of the world]—he is the suffering servant, the broken one, who comes into his glory with his wounds still visible. Those hurt places are the proof that he is who he says he is; because the way you recognize the Christ—and his followers—is not by their muscles [as it were], but by their scars. Which means that they are not to despise the painful parts of their lives anymore. Which means that they are not to interpret their defeats as failures anymore. Which means they are not to fear their enemies anymore, not even death itself. Contrary to all good common sense, they are to follow their leader [beyond their comfort zones] into the...more dangerous places...as wounded healers, whose credentials are their own hurt places. [So.] Starting with Moses and working his way through the prophets,

[Jesus] the stranger opens the Scriptures to them and they [listen intently to] his words. [Yes], he is gifted [with words], but it is more than that. [These two] are wounded [and grieving]; and what he is [saying] is good news. [Maybe all is not lost.] Maybe the rumors [of resurrection] are true. Maybe there is reason to resurrect their crucified hope.” - Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 21.

^{vi} Again, it started with conversation. Conversation—in contrast to mere chit-chat—is how relationships form and hearts are warmed and transformed, and change occurs—or at least the seeds of change are sowed—which then leads to some action from within. Some conversations are life-changing, such as the one on the road to Emmaus. See David Brooks, “Love Story” in *The New York Times* (May 2, 2104) for a wonderful example of a life-changing conversation between the British scholar Isaiah Berlin and Russian poet Anna Akhmatova.

^{vii} Quoted in Robert Edward Luccock, *If God Be For Us: Sermons on the Gifts of the Gospel* (New York: Harper, 1954). In Augustine’s actual writings, the quote that comes closest to this is, “He who created you without you will not justify you without you.” (in his 169th Sermon).

^{viii} In his article, “The Soft Arts of Organizing,” (in *Social Policy*, Winter, 1995, pp. 17-22), Larry B. McNeil discusses “soft arts” which are fundamental to a healthy, purposeful church. They are: listening which includes empathy and relating; being thoughtful; and practicing rituals of praise and prayer, relationship and action. These are important habits. We can have the “hard arts” of inspiring worship, solid Christian formation and education, focused outreach and faithful stewardship, but without the “soft arts” we might have a weak pulse, little spirit, slow motion, and not enough soul. Let’s look at these “soft arts” for a moment.

Listening, empathy, and relating. Those who feel heard become more open, creating opportunity for connection, the real glue of church and other organizations. The strongest churches and organizations budget chunks of time for people to listen to one another. The listening called for in all this is empathic, from the Greek word “*empathia*,” meaning affection, passion. It involves asking questions and learning people’s individual stories and how their stories fit into the bigger story of their family, their community, and their faith journey. It is the work of the leaders and members of this parish to solicit and honor the particularity of each person’s story, to join in making sense of the bigger forces at work around us.

When we hear and tell a story, and connect to another human being, we are relating. Unfortunately we don’t do this often enough. Instead we are often only “in contact” with many people. We see and are seen by others. We often sit in meetings with many others. But we don’t have or take the time to tell our story or hear someone else’s story. We “touch base” with others, but we don’t take the time to meet one-to-one with others, to understand their interests and reveal our interests to them, to find common matters to possibly work on together. So we have the habit of meetings, but not really meeting. We need to curb our habits of falling into “relational ruts” that cut us off from the great variety and energy and talent that reside in those who walk through the doors of our church. We are making a good effort here at All Saints in being intentional in the habits of relating, the “soft art” of listening and empathy; yet we can become much better at this.

The second habit or “soft art” is that of thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness means paying attention, being considerate of other people. Acts of love are grounded on thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness manifests itself in the small things: chairs and tables are set up right; people are greeted; the less verbal people are folded into discussions; opinions are solicited; time is spent bringing people up to date; participation is valued over sophistication; time is respected; recognition is given in appropriately large doses; parish assignments and roles are matched to what people need for their growth; assignments are given with proper direction and time to be successful; we are on time and prepared; and we take and share responsibility for the outcomes.

The final habit or “soft art” that marks strong parish life is that of the rituals of praise and prayer, relationship and action. Ritual transcends the present and connects past, present, and future. Part of the wisdom of our living liturgical tradition is that rituals with regular though flexible rhythm are more important

than sporadic, spectacular ones. The defining ritual in this parish is the Holy Eucharist in which every person present can directly participate prayerfully and repeatedly in the mystery of our Christian faith. It is also important to see the dynamics of ritual in our other gatherings whether in groups or one-to-one. Can we get to a point where our parish meetings are short, clear, participatory and aimed toward action? Stronger churches are action-oriented, pay good attention to briefing people ahead of time, do proper evaluation afterwards, keep the meetings short and few, and ensure that the leaders are trained as needed—and they do this repeatedly.

I suggest that the way to approach some of the “hard arts” of our parish life and work—public Worship, Christian Formation, Outreach, and Stewardship—is through the “soft arts.” I suggest we ask ourselves these general questions. Am I listening? Am I standing in someone else’s shoes? Am I being thoughtful in my relationship with other people? Am I a faithful adherent of our life-giving rituals? This, in turn, may lead to some more specific questions. How are we treating the members and leaders we have? Is our church community part of the center of their interests? How many people have their story at stake in our collective strategies and ministries? How many people are participating in discussions about worship, education, outreach, money? How are we building a relational culture?

The day-in and day-out practice of these “soft arts” builds unbreakable bonds between people, creating organizational sinew—strong and flexible, not subject to break under stress and pressure, a strong, loving and hopeful Body of Christ. Our parish is such a Body. Let us continue to be so.