

Faith Mennonite Church
April 6, 2008, Easter Three

The Bread of Recognition
Luke 24:13-35; Acts 2:42

The [newly baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Acts 2:42

How do we recognize the living Jesus? Might he be in the midst of our daily activities and our conversations, even in our doubts, and we fail to recognize his presence? Do we get so self-preoccupied, so saturated with information, so set in our routines, so infuriated by injustice that we fail to notice the ways in which Jesus is in the midst of all that we do?

Our story this morning is so curious: two of Jesus' followers, not part of the twelve disciples, but evidently close enough to consider themselves part of the intimate band, are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It's the third day since Jesus died. These men are still in those days of the shock and rawness of loss. No doubt they were talking about how the outcome might have been different ... if only Jesus hadn't been so generous toward Judas, if only Nicodemus had stood up in Jesus' defense, if only the crowds, who had cheered for Jesus a few days earlier when he entered Jerusalem, had called for his release instead of that of Jesus-Barabas, if only Pilate and the Roman occupation weren't so quick to crucify people who generated a following... if only.

Despite the word from some women about an empty tomb and a vision of angels, these followers were still in a mode of despair, still seeking answers. Things just didn't make sense. The story didn't seem to have a logical conclusion.

Enter Jesus. Notice that he didn't jump out in front of them, smile and say, "It's your lucky day – I'm back!" or "Don't worry, the death really wasn't that bad and I'm going to a better place." No, he just walked along and listened in. "What are you so deep in conversation about?" They couldn't believe that there was anyone around who didn't know what had been happening. Remember the days after September 11, 2001? It seemed that every conversation was about the attack on the Twin Towers. Or last August 1, the day the 35W bridge collapsed, it was hard to think of or talk about anything else. TV and radio had continuous coverage for several days.

I remember our fall church retreat the weekend following September 11. We came together desperately needing one another. I particularly remember how Gwen Preheim-Bartel sought a safe haven among our group, after having been in a work environment that week in which US flags went up and the predominant sentiments were strongly on the side of revenge. We needed to talk together and weave a narrative for the tragedy that included love and hope.

This is what Jesus did with the travelers on the road to Emmaus. He helped steer the conversation away from despair and blame-placing, to a new understanding of what had happened. They thought that death had dashed their hopes that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel, but Jesus gently reminded them of the prophetic tradition of the suffering servant: the reign of God would come *through* suffering and death; Jesus' death was the beginning not the end.

Although the two later recalled that "their hearts had burned" as Jesus talked to them on the road, the words alone did not bring recognition. They needed a ritual, something symbolic

that moved beyond words. Remember the lament that Leslie Bardo played on her violin at the retreat in 2001? We needed the anguish of her haunting music to release the pain that we felt, both for the tragedy and for the way our country was beginning to respond.

The two weren't planning a ritual when they invited Jesus in. It seems they just wanted to extend hospitality, and clearly this was no usual visitor. He was beginning to wrap some meaning around the week's events. But then it happened. As he had done so often in his ministry, Jesus turned the table. Taking the bread they had set out, he moved from guest to host, blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to them. In that simple act they recognized Jesus. And then he was gone.

All of a sudden they understood the last supper. According to Jewish liturgical scholar Rabbi Larry Hoffman, sometime in history but certainly by the first century bread had become a stand-in for the sacrificial lamb in Jewish liturgical practice; bread had merged with the lamb as a Jewish symbol of salvation and deliverance, celebrated in the Passover meal. So when Jesus took bread at the last supper, a Passover meal, and said "This is my body," he had identified himself as one who would bring deliverance through death, just as the sacrificial lambs had done in Egypt before the Exodus. What they hadn't seen or understood at the time, now became sparkling clear. No longer weary from their just-completed seven-mile hike, they turned around and retraced their path back to tell the disciples what they had experienced, what they now understood.

Jesus had been with them all the time, but they only realized it in retrospect. This is true for much of our life as well. It's usually in hind sight that we recognize and acknowledge the presence of Christ in some of the most difficult times in our lives.

I think this is also true of the life of this congregation during the past 12 years. This church went through a death of sorts when a sizable portion of the church left in the mid-1990s. In the years that followed, those who remained needed to create a new narrative, a new story of who you were. The church had voted to be a welcoming congregation for glbt persons, but that meant different things to different people. Some wished to plunge ahead openly and boldly. Others wished to find a way to stay in conversation with the conference and the broader denomination, even if that was slow and agonizing. For the most part, we've stayed together, not always fully agreeing or comfortable, but I firmly believe that Jesus has been walking with us and holding us together. Each year that our delegates and youth go to the Central Plains annual meeting or the bi-annual national assemblies and conventions, we are like the followers at Emmaus, hiking back to Jerusalem, to witness to what has happened to us along the road, and how Jesus has been made known to us as we've broken bread and worked together to be a community of inclusion. Let us give thanks. Let us continue to listen to Jesus as we create the next part of our story.