

Faith Mennonite Church
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From “the way” to “the table”: hearts burn and eyes open
Luke 24:28-35

When I was a student at Goshen College in the 1970s, I served as a student assistant on the campus ministry team for a couple years. One of the projects I worked on was to create an “Adopt-a-Grandparent” program through which college students could form a relationship with an elder who lived at the nearby Greencroft retirement community. In the initial stage of the project, I met with the Greencroft activities director who gave me a tour of Central Manor, a facility that had efficiency apartments for single persons. As we walked down the hallway, she commented that when she would walk the halls at noon, she would often find opened doors with people standing in their kitchen eating lunch. “It’s not much fun to cook for one and there’s less of a reason to sit to eat when a meal isn’t shared.”

I’m guessing that as we think about the most memorable meal experiences we’ve had, most, if not all, were in the company of others. The food doesn’t have to be elaborate—bread and cheese will do—but the presence of another person to share the sustenance has a way of miraculously turning simple foods into a memorable, festive occasion. Some of these occasions may have occurred in a setting where there was a language barrier, yet the very basic act of eating together, of receiving the gift of food, formed bonds of companionship, of shared humanity.

Something shifts in the story with the Emmaus Road disciples when they arrive at their destination and extend hospitality to Jesus, whom they still do not recognize, even though he has been reviewing scripture in relation to his death and resurrection. It appears they intended to offer him both food and a bed, but they only get as far as the food. For when they put bread on the table, Jesus automatically became the host (as he does throughout the Gospel of Luke in numerous meal stories), blessing and breaking the bread. And at that moment two things happen: the disciples recognize him *and* he disappears.

Something happened in the ritual breaking of bread, when they were seated at the table, that hadn’t happened when they were on the road listening to Jesus’ words. And once the awareness came, Jesus moved on, as he did in all of his resurrection appearances, and also in his three-year ministry. During his years of ministry he was an itinerant: he taught, he announced the kingdom, he invited some to follow, and then he moved on. Crowds came but he didn’t bask in their affection. He wanted to point them to God and to their neighbors. He wanted them to be and do for others what he demonstrated.

During our congregational visioning process a year ago in May 2014, Rudy Okerlund and Tyler Zabriskie led us in an exercise that helped us think about the inward and outward aspects of our life as a church community. Tyler created a chart with two axes: one axis was interpersonal connection – from acquaintance to vulnerability; the other axis was our connection beyond our walls—from reluctant to outgoing. Although many of us are introverts, those who participated indicated they’d like our church to continue moving in the direction of greater vulnerability among ourselves (becoming known to one another in more deeply personal/spiritual ways) *and* greater engagement with persons outside of our church community.

The Emmaus Road story gives us encouragement and some pointers for this ongoing process:

Continuing on last Sunday's theme, we build vulnerability within and engage with those beyond our community as *we open ourselves to the stranger and to uncertainty in our lives*. One of the teachings of St. Benedict, as he was forming a community in the first half of the sixth century (and has continued a central teaching of Benedictine communities today) was that every guest who arrived at the door was to be welcomed as if he/she were Christ. The disciples in our story made room for the stranger Jesus because of, and by admitting, their uncertainty. Viewing others as if they are Christ will engender a curiosity to get to know them better. Admitting that we don't have all the answers helps others feel comfortable in our presence.

Increasing vulnerability and outward engagement requires some *inconvenience, making space for the unexpected encounters*. One of the most challenging aspects of living in an affluent, urban setting in the 21st century, is the constant flurry of activity: workplace trends continue to make increased demands on people's time (fewer people are expected to do more); technology and social media have increased the number of people we feel personally connected to on a daily basis; the arts and entertainment industry offers multiple opportunities every day. The combined effect of these and other factors leaves most of us with very little time or the physical and psychological energy for the kind of "on the way" conversation that the disciples had with Jesus, or for offering spontaneous hospitality. I'm not sure we will have those heart-burning, eye-opening experiences unless we purposefully declutter our lives, saying no to some of the good in order to say yes to something even better.

Finally, this story tells us we must *hold loosely to that which we treasure the most*. When the disciples finally recognized Jesus he vanished; they couldn't hold on to him. What is it that we treasure most as a congregation? In the 15 years that I've been here, in almost every conversation we've had about what draws and keeps us here, "community" always ranks at the top. But *Christian* community is a special breed. Someone has said (and I have quoted this before), that the church is the only community that exists for those who *aren't* members. Yes, this community provides us support and identity, but like the Jesus who vanishes just as the disciples "get it," which sends them hiking back to Jerusalem to share what had transpired, the Spirit challenges us to not simply protect what we cherish for our own sake, but to share this experience and invite others into a healing relationship with Christ, into a community of courage and transformation.

Donna Stucky was one of our delegates at the Mennonite Convention in Kansas City. Unfortunately she was not able to be present the Sunday in August when several people gave reports from the national and regional conferences. I've asked Donna if she might share briefly her experience of being at a delegate table with "strangers" in Kansas City.