

Faith Mennonite Church
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On the Way: Walking in uncertainty
Luke 24:13-27

The Emmaus Road story has been a favorite of mine for many years, especially the second half, which we will get to next week. The verses that follow our reading today include hospitality and food, something that I always find compelling. But this first half of the story also provides much to ruminate on. So much so that the first two sermons during the daily morning worship at the Mennonite Convention in Kansas City in early July were based on these opening verses.

Our gathering in Kansas City carried a lot of uncertainty, just like that walk that the two disciples were taking between Jerusalem and Emmaus. We might think the stakes were a bit higher for them. Their story occurred just after the crucifixion of Jesus, that barbarous event that shattered hopes and dreams and left those who had followed Jesus wondering what the past three years had really been all about. Oh yes, some of the women brought an incredible story – that they had found an empty tomb and some mysterious visitors had told them Jesus was alive. But how to make sense of it all.

We moderns gathered in Kansas City were living our own disillusionment. Fewer than 15 years after we had formed a new, merged denomination, with hopes of a more robust, unified witness in the world, we seemed to be coming apart at the seams. In hindsight we realize that some of the seams were tenuous from the beginning, sewed with large stitches and weak thread: some regional conferences hesitated initially to join and few conferences merged at the regional level; the lives and relationships of gay and lesbian people were scapegoated in the process; significant differences existed, and continue to exist, in how people interpreted the Bible and understood the heart of Anabaptist theology and practice.

Dale Schrag, recently retired director of church relations at Bethel College in Newton, KS, gave a sermon in which he encouraged us to *embrace* rather than fear the uncertainty that the disciples on the Emmaus road felt and the uncertainty of our own time. He noted that it is almost counter cultural today to admit uncertainty. With so much change around us, many people seek certainty as an anchor to hold on to. But Schrag countered: “If anyone on every side of the current decisive issue [i.e. sexuality] admitted that because they are not God they might be wrong, how would decision making be different? It would facilitate us sitting at a table with each other,” he said, “like Cleopas did with Jesus at the breaking of bread.”¹ (Of course, that gets us ahead of the story!)

It’s okay to be uncertain. If the Emmaus road disciples had been certain – either that there was no hope (Jesus was plain dead) or that he was alive (no doubt about it), would Jesus have shown up? Or was their very uncertainty the invitation. Did their uncertainty open them to learning something new, to hearing with new ears, seeing with new eyes, feeling with a new heart? Their uncertainty allowed them to continue to listen even when Jesus called them “foolish ones and slow of heart to believe.” When we’re certain and someone calls us foolish we become

¹ <http://mennoniteusa.org/news/worship-service-encourages-uncertainty-healing/>

defensive and hold on to our position all the more tightly. But when we're uncertain we're willing to take a second look.

When Jesus said the disciples were slow of heart to believe he was speaking of believing “all that the prophets have spoken” (24:26). In another sermon, Patty Shelly, our new moderator for MCUSA and a Bible professor at Bethel College in Kansas, focused on this point (as a Bible professor would). She emphasized that the writer continued, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [the risen stranger] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:27). Now Jesus didn't give a quick 15-minute sermon, he had a whole seven miles—nearly two hours at a steady pace—to discuss Scripture with these fellow travelers. I suppose Jesus could have revealed himself simply in a visible way and made a personal case for his presence—“Look, I'm here; it's me!” But he didn't. He turned to scripture. He repeated passages that they likely knew by heart, but he gave them a new interpretation. He led them to understand these passages in a different way as a result of his suffering and death. The words on the parchment and in their memory had not changed, but Jesus' experience and now his words provided a new perspective, a new insight into the meaning of those words.

The former interpretations that these disciples held were not necessarily wrong, but they weren't complete, they didn't contain the full story. And Jesus didn't turn away from the scriptures as being irrelevant in this new reality, but showed how a new experience of God's activity in the world shed new light on their meaning. This is important for us today. Jesus continues to call us to search the scripture for meaning and direction, and it requires our time and attention to be guided by the Spirit as we seek to interpret the events and the decisions we must make in a fast-paced, ever-changing world.

Since the Kansas City convention I've been following a blog series written by Michael King, the dean of Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Virginia (and the pastor who presided at Dan and Andi's wedding some years ago). Addressing the future of the church and theological training, his blog series is titled “Hope as Church Unravels?”² In one recent post he addressed the theme of uncertainty, also drawing on the Emmaus Road story. He noted the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus and drew a parallel: “As we confront denominational, congregational, higher education, or theological arrangements too constricting for God's wild and wonderful work among us, we'll sometimes not recognize this risen Jesus, believed dead, even as he joins us.” He continued, referring to the divisive issues around which we find ourselves on divergent paths in our larger church:

We convince ourselves Jesus is in our understandings. I suspect that's true; almost by definition if a matter requires discernment this is because how to proceed has become a larger matter than any of us alone can fully grasp. Hence our particular understanding may well represent aspects of Jesus others need and vice-versa. If so, this calls for politics, theologies, biblical interpretations humble enough and gentle enough to allow us to be partly right and wrong. That means being ready to welcome even—maybe especially—those we consider wrong. ... Might we more easily recognize Jesus by confessing that when most sure we see Jesus we might be wrong? And when we have no idea Jesus walks with us this may be exactly what he's doing?”

I'm well aware that for many of us, the workings of the larger Mennonite Church are distant and not especially meaningful or urgent. But the experience of the two disciples walking

² Michael King, “Recognizing Jesus When Phone Booths Vanish,” <http://www.cascadiapublishinghouse.com/KingsviewCo/?p=294>.

to Emmaus was connected to the larger Jesus movement. Part 2 of the story has them back on the road heading back to Jerusalem that same evening to share their new understanding. What we experience personally is connected to our local community and what we experience as a local church is connected to the larger body of Christ, that which we remember and celebrate when we gather at the communion table.

But before we do that and in preparation to do that, I invite us to take a moment to consider the places of uncertainty in our lives at this very moment. Whether that uncertainty is cause for pain, for apprehension, for anguish, for exhaustion, for expectation of a new beginning, let us all be reminded that Jesus is walking with us. We may not yet recognize his presence, we may not fully understand how our momentary story fits with the down-through-the-ages-and-for-all-time God-story. But if we continue to talk with one another on this road of uncertainty and to listen to the ancient words of scripture, Jesus will become known to us.

Let us pray: Oh God, we trust that you are present with us through your Spirit, in the midst of our uncertainties – those that we experience personally, those that our denomination and other parts of your church struggle through. Help us to listen and be led, help us to be gracious to those who share the path with us, especially when we are not in full agreement. And as we come to the table, let us recall how deeply you love us, and how the death of Jesus brings us life. May we be nourished by this life. Amen.