

Luke 24:13-35 The Divine Predicament
April 23, 2023

Six years ago the gospel reading from Luke was the Emmaus Road story. The focus of the message was on the idea of recognition. The two disciples had previously been with Jesus only days before, but they spent hours with him on the Emmaus Road without a clue, not recognizing him at all.

Part of the human condition is that people often fail to recognize the Risen Lord, that is, they fail to see the presence of God in their lives; in their midst, and in the world. Sometimes we think we know, but God is not that easy to pin down. Other times the world seems a godless place, though our theology tells us that God is everywhere, and in every moment. The sense of God's absence is discouraging.

The story in the Gospel of Luke says the two disciples recognized Jesus when he opened the scriptures to them. They saw him in the great liberator and law-giver Moses. They saw Jesus in the things that the law and the prophets represent; the call to authentic faith; to goodness and right living; the call to justice and mercy.

They saw Jesus in the stories about David the shepherd boy who slew the giant. They saw him in the psalms which offer praise and give thanks but also question everything and complain and grieve as well as confess and proclaim.

On the cross of Jesus they saw the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, which means they saw God in the willingness to suffer and die *for* someone else.

They saw God in the way Jesus treated people of other backgrounds, that is, the Gentiles. They saw God in the way Jesus treated women, the downtrodden, the blind, the lame, the sick, those who were bereaved.

They saw him heal and bless, feed and liberate, they saw him bring unity and wholeness to those whose inner lives were conflicted. They saw him raise the dead.

We too, *can* recognize the risen Jesus in the world and in our lives whenever we see goodness and justice and mercy played out; and I might add, beauty and kindness, reconciliation, healing, and we see these things all the time, but sometimes fail to attach divine significance to them.

In other words, God *is* in the world and in our lives all around, but in a way that does not require us to look and to see, or to hear and to listen. In lieu of being forced or obligated, we are given the opportunity to seek, to pursue, "Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and you find, knock and it will be opened to you," not out of compulsion, but of a genuine desire to see, and to recognize, and to know God.

That was the direction of the message six years ago. Permit me to pursue a different avenue this morning.

Theologians and preachers and faithful people rarely speak of the divine situation, but I believe that it bears our consideration, and might be helpful. Part of the Divine Predicament, and it is a predicament because it is not merely a situation, but has some conditions in it that make it challenging, is that human beings, fail to recognize the divine presence.

Can we see from this other perspective. Can we let this task focus our attention for a few minutes. The divine predicament is also a question of salvation. How can God save human beings without destroying the person in the process?

In addition to the awkwardness of the failure to recognize others, we also know the other side of the equation. Have you ever met someone from your past; perhaps someone with whom you went to school; or worked, or played with on a team? And when you met them it was clear they didn't recognize you?

Surely most of us have had this experience. It is awkward enough when they remember and we don't. It is also uncomfortable when *we* remember, and *they* do not. Should we say something? Should we try to help them remember? Are we hurt to be so unremarkable as to be forgotten?

The divine predicament is to be revealed and known in such a way that it enhances, and not diminishes the person; honors their will and their freedom, rather than destroying the personhood of the believer, so that

when recognition comes, it is powerful and redemptive.

I think of Artificial Intelligence, which is the attempt to imitate human intelligence in a machine. Can a computer assume personhood? This aspect of our humanity, is what makes us what we are. But it is also our biggest problem. Might God be able to redeem human beings by taking away their personhood so they would obey their programming? Perhaps so, but then we wouldn't be persons.

The story says that when they got to Emmaus, *they invited him* to dinner. When he broke the bread, as he had a few days earlier . . . they saw . . . then he disappeared. There is something about human interaction that facilitates vision. It is often in the everyday interactions of our lives that we learn to recognize each other . . . and it stands to reason, that in paying attention we learn to see the Risen Lord.

Easter is experienced as a get together with strangers, people barely recognized. Life is a get-together, and if you want to recognize Jesus . . . show up and pay attention. Live life open-minded, open-hearted, and open-eyed. There will be some hard things along the way, some disappointments, but they do not get the last word.

There are some conditions: one can't be in control of the situation (any sense of control is illusory); and one must set aside selfish concern and pre-conceived notions about what life in life in God's realm is like.

But what about God's situation. How can God save us without turning off the person and leaving only the computer? In the depth of Easter's meaning, God finds a way to be invited to dinner where the miracle occurs. It is we who invite God to the banquet to which God has invited us.

Each week we see the painting of Jesus in the window standing at the door knocking. In the great sermon (The Sermon on the Mount), it is we who are instructed to knock . . . at last the divine will and the human will agree . . . the divine predicament fades like a mist.

Vision, recognition happens, that one way or another we each find an Emmaus experience. and once that happens, everything is changed. We are invited by the victory of life and goodness and meaning, to carry around in our hearts a blessed hope and a cautious optimism (maybe not even all that cautious sometimes); and a respect and love for every person, and a grief beyond words at the sight of brokenness we see along the way.

And yes, to citizenship and the pursuit of justice, to a high standard of morality and ethics, but not as a burden but rather as a delight; to service. It is in Jesus, and through Jesus, in the moments when like Tom Sawyer who convinced his friends to pay him to paint the fence, that God is seen and recognized, that the divine predicament is resolved.

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