

United Church in the Valley: May 12, 2019

Student Minister: Matthew Heesing

***Making Space for the Sharing***

Pt II: "...through Presence"

Scripture Reading:

*Luke 24:13-35:*

After Jesus died, two of his disciples were walking to a village called Emmaus,  
about seven miles from Jerusalem,  
and they were talking with each other about everything that had happened.  
While they were talking and discussing,  
Jesus himself came near and walked with them, but they did not recognize him.  
And Jesus said to them: "What are you discussing with each other, while you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast.  
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 in the last few days?"  
Jesus asked them, "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth,  
who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,  
and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified.  
We had hoped that he was the one who was going to save us all.  
And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.  
This morning, some of our women amazed us.  
They went to the tomb, but didn't find his body.  
They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.  
Then some of our companions went to the tomb  
and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

Jesus responded, "But didn't the prophets say something about that?  
Isn't that in the Holy Scriptures?"  
And Jesus continued walking and talking with the two disciples.

As they came near the village to which they were going,  
Jesus walked ahead as if he were going on.  
But the disciples urged him strongly, saying,  
"Stay with us, for it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."  
So he went in to stay with them.  
When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.  
Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other,  
"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?"  
That same hour, they got up and returned to Jerusalem,  
and they found the other disciples all gathered together.  
Then the two told them what had happened on the road.

Sermon:

Have you ever met someone  
 who immediately, upon an introduction,  
 began to tell you  
 everything that was apparently wrong with your life  
 and that you, right now,  
 needed saving?

I have.  
 More often than not,  
 such individuals  
 called themselves Christians.

And yet, despite their arguably admirable intentions  
 in trying to present a better way for me to be  
 or helping me to see what they called Good News,  
 the Gospel that they were truly trying to share,  
 I'll admit, I found it hard to care—  
 why should I? How could I?  
 These people didn't know me,  
 or know any of my story,  
 yet there they stood before me,  
 in front of me, not by my side,  
 as they tried to convince and change my mind—  
 no wonder I was so disinclined to listen.

So how *do* we respond to the call of Jesus  
 to go to the world and spread the Good News?  
 How do we make space for the sharing of our faith  
 in a way that invites and even delights,  
 not dis-inclines or quickly slams the door?

Over the next four weeks,  
 we'll keep exploring that question,  
 but last week we started by talking about peace—  
 how a sense of peace is *foundational*  
 when it comes to sharing our faith with others—  
 for, it seems to me, that if we are worried, like the first disciples,  
 that we will be too much  
 or that we will be too little—not enough—  
 we'll find evangelism tough to practice,  
 at least in a healthy and positive form.

Receiving the peace of Christ,  
 the reminder that we are enough,  
 that we have nothing to prove, is essential  
 before we even step out to respond.

But what comes next?  
 After we accept the peace of Christ,  
 leaving behind our worry and fear—  
 how will we then come near to others?

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 two of his disciples were walking to a village called Emmaus,  
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 about everything that had happened.  
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 Jesus himself came near and walked with them,  
 but they did not recognize him.*

*And Jesus said to them:  
 “What are you discussing with each other,  
 while you walk along?”  
 They stood still, their faces downcast.  
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 who does not know  
 the things that have taken place in the last few days?”  
 Jesus asked them, “What things?”*

When I was 19, I lived in Bogota, Colombia,  
 serving as an Overseas Mission Personnel  
 for the wider United Church of Canada.  
 Before I went, I had training in Toronto—  
 around two weeks of intentional learning  
 about intercultural ministry  
 and the United Church missionary model of accompaniment.

For when it comes to missionary work overseas,  
 the United Church of Canada is very different  
 from any other denomination or religious organization:  
 over anything else, we prioritize presence.  
 As a Church, we send individuals all around the world,  
 not to fix or solve or present a solution  
 but rather, simply, to be—  
 to walk, to talk, to meet and eat with,  
 to come alongside others on their journey.

And to be completely honest,  
 practicing that kind of presence can be hard.

It's hard to walk alongside,  
 instead of standing in front.  
 It's hard to talk, to ask questions and be curious,  
 when it's easier to assume we have the answers,  
 when clearly, the issues of others could instantly be solved by us.  
 It's hard to *meet* with others,  
 especially those on a different page or stage of life.  
 It's hard to *eat* with others,  
 to slow down enough to share a meal,  
 as equals gathered around a common table.  
 We'd much rather do things our way, at our speed,  
 with our own need for control, expertise, and authority.

It's hard to practice the kind of presence  
 that simply comes alongside others on their journey.

And I confess, that over the course of my time in Colombia,  
 I consistently had to resist the constant urge  
 to immediately, almost right after an introduction,  
 begin to tell someone else  
 everything that was apparently wrong with their life  
 and that they, right now, needed saving—  
 whether saving from a water problem  
 that North American technology could easily fix,  
 or saving from a dysfunctional governance model  
 that North American democracy could certainly improve,  
 or saving from what I deemed harmful doctrines  
 about God, or Jesus, or other religious issues.  
 I knew what was right for them—  
 or at least, that was my impulse.

And I'm immensely grateful  
 for the training in Toronto I received  
 that kept such an automatic, inherent, even if good intentioned  
 impulse almost always in check.  
 But I'll never forget travelling to a rural part of Colombia  
 with a volunteer from a church in Germany,  
 who, upon first meeting a group of peasant fruit farmers,  
 proceeded to instruct them on the *right* way to harvest.  
 It was painful.

It *is* painful  
 when our sharing doesn't come from a foundation,  
 first, of *peace*—I am enough, I have nothing to prove—  
 and second, of *presence*—  
 to simply walk and talk and be  
 and put our own agenda to the side.

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In our reading for this morning,  
 we hear how Jesus met these other individuals  
 exactly where they were, right there, on the road:  
 these people are not in a synagogue or a church,  
 nor even in the room with all the other believers.  
 But Jesus meets them where they are.

These people are disheartened, down,  
 emotionally distraught from the events of the last few days.  
 They don't yet have the hope of resurrection in their hearts.  
 But Jesus meets them where they are.

And even intellectually, these people,  
 when it comes to understanding what has happened  
 and what it means, they just don't get it.  
 But Jesus meets them where they are.

These people fail to recognize Jesus—  
 the risen Christ right in their midst.  
 Their eyes are closed to a spiritual reality.  
 But Jesus—Jesus meets them where they are.

Jesus joins them on the journey—  
 Jesus, he embodies accompaniment,  
 he offers an intentional presence,  
 a way of simply walking, talking, being with—  
 not feeling judgmental,  
 but joining,  
 a posture not of criticism, but of curiosity,  
 an approach not of aloofness,  
 better-than, or only-I-can,  
 but of genuine, committed engagement with another.

And it is only *afterward*,  
 once Jesus leaves,  
 that the two individuals look at each other and say—  
 Wow, that was Jesus!  
 “*Were not our hearts burning within us  
 while he was talking to us on the road?*”  
 That same hour, they got up  
 and returned to Jerusalem,  
 and they found the other disciples  
 all gathered together.  
 Then the two told them  
 what had happened.

Carl W. Buehner,  
 who also happened to be a high-ranking member  
 of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,  
 once wrote,  
 “People may forget what you said—  
 but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

Or, to quote St. Francis of Assisi,  
 “Preach the Gospel at all times.  
 If necessary, use words.”

So much of what we have to share,  
 especially in terms of our faith,  
 is communicated well before we even start to speak.  
 Now, the act speaking *is* important,  
 proclamation has its place,  
 and as for how, we’ll get to that next week—  
 but before we open our mouths, let’s seek  
 to make space for the sharing through  
 presence:  
 to first meet others where they are on the journey,  
 even if that is beyond the four walls of this building,  
 even if it means encountering difficult emotions,  
 even if it means being on a different wave length, intellectually,  
 even if it means discussing disparate religious beliefs.  
 Let’s get to know other people’s  
 dreams, desires, and disappointments,  
 before we even dare to consider our agenda;  
 let’s listen to and enter into someone else’s story,  
 before we share *our own* experience of faith.

Maybe, just maybe, in the process,  
 people will also recognize Jesus through us—

after all,  
to be Christian,  
literally, is to be a “mini Christ.”

So like the risen Christ,  
may we practice making space for the sharing  
through presence:  
the presence that subtly comes alongside others,  
instead of standing in front, and confronting;  
and rather than interrupting or disrupting,  
may we listen before we speak,  
may we stifle our impulse to correct and object,  
but instead may we accept and join others  
wherever they happen to be on the journey this day,  
may we be present  
to others in a way  
that might them to later say,

*“Were not our hearts burning within us  
while he was talking to us on the road?”*

*or,*

*“Were not our hearts burning within us  
while she was talking to us on the road?”*

*or,*

*“Were not our hearts burning within us  
while they were talking to us on the road?”*

*Wow, that was Jesus!*

Thanks be to God.