

Trinity Church on the Green
Sunday April 30, 2017
Third Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Luk De Volder
Sermon

Acts 2:14a,36-41
Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

Their eyes were kept from recognizing him. There are moments in life when we can't see straight anymore, while we are hoping for some liberation. We can't find a way to escape out of our frame of mind. At times, real life can have a lot of disillusion, an inventory of bruises and scars, lost hopes, and evaporated dreams. Especially in this season of church decline and political turmoil we may go home at times and wonder: where did all the heroes go? Is there nothing sacred left? Was God not supposed to intervene once in a while?

This past week I attended a Diversity and Integrity training at the Visions worship up in Boston, promoted by our bishop Ian Douglas. I learned a lot, most of all that there is still so much to learn. Most visionary and revealing to me was this one conversation I had with Lawrence, an African-American man in his mid-Twenties, with a heart of gold, a disarming honesty, and remarkable resilience. He decided to share his story with me. Lawrence is the youngest of 7 children, but the only one with a college degree, which gives him tremendous responsibility. Recently the national wave of lay-offs at Macy's department stores also affected his managerial job. I confess, he said, it triggered in me the reflection of system beating. At first, I thought, the HR system had selected me out because of my color. But now, he told me, I can see how this is mostly due to internalized oppression. I am not denying that at times I do experience exclusion in life. But after internalizing these experiences, I can also frame my own choices in that negative narrative. After reading scripture I come to realize I always have the freedom to step outside of those framing and limiting mindsets. Do you see what I mean? he asked. I was blown away by his honesty, his self-awareness, and his willingness to address what he learnt about himself. And he added another question: do you see internalized oppression in your life? Bam - What compassion & empathy for a white male he had only known for a day or two. I was so moved. We talked for much longer about the future he is hoping to build, the loss of friendships he experiences because he has a college degree, and the support he needs to help others. I couldn't help but notice our hearts burning. We both walked away, fired up, with a deepened willingness and new insight to address the realities of oppression in our own lives and around us. This conversation made me realize how much frame of mind is keeping conversations about race from evolving; how much certain mindsets could be changed by these kinds of conversations.

The striking part of my conversation with Lawrence was, like the Emmaus-disciples story, we were two guys who went on and on. Men talking about their issues? Our pity-duet, like the despair litany of the Emmaus-disciples, took off, not so much because we like to complain or think we have a license to wallow, but because the anxieties and tensions of all the expectations I fail to meet are running through me, the shadow-side of my personality, all of this can make me feel like life is not clicking, as if my life is at a stand-still. A church without a success Messiah, a life without a career, Where do I go? As burned-out employees, these two Emmaus-disciples are at a stand-still. How do they get their lives back on track?

Luke's record of what happened on the walk away from Jerusalem, away from the place where God is, shows three steps of recovery and liberation: 1) feeling heard, that someone listens to you; 2) interrupting and transcending our own limited narrative; 3) seeing what you see.

First there is ample time to tell your story, so that you feel heard. This is not simply a matter of feeling understood. It is a moment during which we start to sense that the shadow-side of life, our shortcomings, weaknesses, anxieties, do not need to be kept in hiding. In fact, grace is seeking to avoid that split in us, between the ideal me and the failed me. Rather, this is a moment to integrate my shadow-side. God is hoping to embrace me, also in the parts where I feel the Messiah is gone, those parts where I see no light or hope at this moment. Arriving at church should indeed be about your issues, should include where it hurts, where you are angry and sad, what matters to you right now.

Second: Jesus intervenes. O ye fools. It seems at first Jesus didn't read the communication guidelines to avoid as much as possible the use of 'but'. You did a great job, but. We like you at the office, but. Oh, that fatal but. In Jesus's defense, he didn't say "but". Nor is this a mere sneer. It is more like Gandalf in the Lord of the Rings affectionately saying to Frodo and his friend: you my fools. In fact, the Greek word points to a deeper level: *anoëtes* can also be translated as "you who are unaware". Haven't you read the scriptures?

Faced with a crisis of confidence and hope, the story invites us to match it with a practice of inserting a perspective from outside our frame work. Jesus's move is a bit like the exercise of Ludwig Wittgenstein showing his students a drawing of a rabbit and when he turns the drawing you see a duck. Wittgenstein's question was: is this a drawing of a rabbit or a duck. Neither, he said. The lines we choose are the framework we decide on.

At times, we indeed can be so stuck in a frame of mind that renewal is not possible. It takes a kind of mental intervention that lifts us out of that framework to help our awareness to wake up and see that we have the freedom to see things differently, to stop the tape of negativity in our heads. The spiritual practice of reading scripture with Jesus is indeed this moment of increased awareness through which we allow ourselves to be lifted out of our own frame of mind. This is why bringing the book into the middle of our church is meant to express scripture coming into the middle of my life.

Third: the scene goes from a side-by-side conversation to a sit-down dinner. Now the conversation rolls into a face-to-face experience. I no longer have to hide my shadow side, my framework, and my tape repeating my limited conclusions on life has been paused. Now the meeting turns to what Charles Péguy once voiced: See what you see. Only when bread broke in front of their eyes could they realize what they were staring at - the loss, the decline, the finality of it all, and what prevented them from really seeing. And all of the sudden the broken bread created the opening to look beyond their cherished insights and ways of seeing things into a presence. As it happens at dinners, in the experience of eating and being together, a warmth manifests itself. The food is an expression of the bond. We may even sense a certain excess, a sense of exceeding, an evocative sense of communion. Being together just became poetic. The different parts of life have just reach a point of integration. This is why the breaking of the bread, over and over again, is so crucial. In it we are willing to break up our outlook on the world and allow the perspective of grace to insert itself.

As a result, the disciples recognize him. The next thing you know, they are walking again. There is renewal, recovery. There is liberation. Ever since, Christians have followed the same pattern each Sunday: expressing where they are in life; reading scripture as if Jesus is telling us; breaking bread to

create communion and an opening in our minds and hearts. There is mission. Let's do this, live this, carry out this liberation. The Christian writer Max Lucado wrote a book entitled: "It's not about me." Sorry Max: It is about me. He has a point against narcissism, but the title is misleading in suggesting that coming to church and having faith would not be about my needs. Christ died for me. In that sense, it is about me.

Also, as it turns out, these steps of practice were never meant to be a ritual only. These are moves of liberation, to come as you are, to spill all your c-r-a-p, to integrate your sense of failure into a path of hope. By allowing the voice and perspective of the Other - with capital O - to come in my life, I, in turn, am lifted up outside the confines of my own reservations, anxieties and limited thinking and I return to the world with an open heart, a heart that is healed and strengthened. Or in more classical terms: the presence of the Lord, not only brings me salvation, Jesus also empowers me to bring others into the hope of love and trust. I hope these practices of liberation will also for you remain fresh, unlock your heart where needed, turn your life back into gear. In Christ we pray. Amen.