

Jesus and Friends

Luke 24:13-35

In Presbyterian Confirmation we talk a lot about
being on a journey of faith.
And that makes the Road to Emmaus story
the perfect story for Confirmation Sunday.

These two disciples of Jesus are making their way toward the town of Emmaus.
They are on a journey away from Jerusalem,
away from the place where Jesus has been crucified,
on the way to somewhere else — perhaps, anywhere else —
anywhere away from the awful events of the past few days.

Luke tells us Emmaus is a seven mile journey from Jerusalem,
but no one knows exactly where Emmaus was.
Sometimes it shows up on a map of ancient Palestine,
but the location of Emmaus is anybody's guess.

So while we may have no idea where Emmaus is,
it's a place we all want to go from time to time,
when we just want to get away from it all.

The road to Emmaus for these two disciples
is a road of deep disappointment.
As they walk along and talk
they are trying to process
the unbearable events of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross.
Also, there is this disturbing report of the women who had gone to Jesus' tomb
and found it empty,
and who may be losing their grip on reality
because they are claiming to have seen a vision of angels
saying that Jesus was alive.

In the midst of their sadness, Jesus meets these two travelers.
They do not know that it is Jesus, of course.
They are so wrapped up in their disappointments that they do not recognize him.
They are a little taken aback when he asks what they are talking about:
*Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem
who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days*
And Jesus asks them, *What things?*

That's a question that might be asked of us.

What things?

What things in your life right now are most vexing, most challenging?

What things in your life that are holding you back?

What is consuming your attention?

What are the things in your life that, if you could resolve them,

would make you truly happy,

and would set you on a path of abundant life and true purpose?

What are the things in your life for which you most need God's help,

for which you most need a sense of hope?

On the Confirmation journey,

we ask our Confirmands to take the story of the church, the story of Jesus,

and to talk about how that story intersects with their own story;

we ask our Confirmands to make some sense of their own lives

in the light of our belief in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

we ask them to consider these things we say in the Apostles' Creed,

and what they could possibly mean

for an 8th grader growing up in Greenville, South Carolina.

That can be a challenge for an 8th grader!

For that matter, it can be a challenge for an adult!

And so our Confirmands work at writing a statement of faith.

For some, they talk about the faith expressed in the Apostles' Creed,

and I have to ask them, what does this have to do with you and your life.

For others, they talk about their lives and their challenges and struggles,

and I have to ask them, but what does this have to do with Jesus?

I have been teaching confirmation for more than 20 years now,

and every year that I review statements of faith,

I have to write on several of them,

"What about Jesus? You might want to mention Jesus in here,

at least once!"

That's because even though Jesus meets us all the time on our journeys,

we are like these disciples on the road to Emmaus:

we don't recognize him.

He may meet us and have a profound impact on us,

but we do not realize until later reflection that it was Jesus.

So how do we learn recognize Jesus?

By spending time getting to know him, in two ways, in particular:

in the two ways that are specifically mentioned in this story.

By spending time in the Word.

And by sharing in the Meal Jesus share with us.

When the disciples shared in this Meal with Jesus,
their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and they exclaimed,
*"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road,
while he was opening the scriptures to us?"*

If we want to recognize Jesus,
there is just no substitute for reading the scriptures about Jesus,
as well as the scriptures that were Jesus' scriptures,
that is the Old Testament.

Is reading the Bible hard? Yes!

Training for a marathon is hard,
but if you want to run a marathon, you have to train for it.

If you want to recognize Jesus on your journey,
you have to read the scriptures.

The wonderful thing about being a member of the church
is that we have at least one big opportunity to do this
every week.

In the same way,
there is no substitute for sharing in the Supper in which we remember Jesus
and in which we believe Jesus actually, really meets us:
the Lord's Supper.
And we do this once a month here at Fourth.

[If you are having a hard time understanding what Jesus has to do with your life,
it may be because many of you are not showing up in this sacred space
all that often.]

*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.*

And then, what happens next in this story?
What happens next is the reason for the title of this sermon,
"Jesus and Friends."

What happens next is that these two disciples are compelled —
and we have to give credit to the Holy Spirit for this —
they were compelled to turn around and go the other way,
back to Jerusalem, to be with the other disciples.
They were compelled to be with their friends,
the other friends of Jesus.

Friends are so important in life,
but they feel especially important in Middle School and High School.

Our adolescent years
are such transitional years,
and when we are in transition, we need friends to lean on, even to cling to,
to support us.
Adolescence is also a time when we feel rather defined
by who our friends are.

Now I know that for Christian teens today,
there is a lot of moving around from church to church
in search of that church where your [their] friends are.
And there are a lot of parents who fret over
finding a church where their children's friends are.
Raising children and teens these days can be a scary experience,
so I understand the anxiety.

But I have to say, we've kind of gotten things out of order.
True Christian friendship happens when we meet Jesus,
and in meeting Jesus and recognizing him
we are drawn together with the others who have also met Jesus.
We may run hither and yon, from this church to that (and adults do this, too, by the way)
and we may find the friends we think we want,
the "right" friends,
but still...never get to know Jesus,
never learn to recognize Jesus.

Going to church is first of all about meeting Jesus,
and only then about having friends who have also met Jesus.
When we have met the risen Jesus,
then we are drawn into fellowship with others
who also have been encountered by the risen Jesus.

Let me say one more thing to our Confirmands.

One of the most painful things in life — at any age, but especially in teenage life —
is the experience of being excluded.
If there is anything a church youth group ought to be,
it is a place where no one is excluded,
a community of friends where anyone who is seeking to follow Jesus can belong.

If you come to youth group not seeking to follow Jesus first of all,
but just seeking a group of friends,
you will be tempted to exclude others to protect your own belonging.
But that is not what a church youth group is meant to be.

Right now, as you enter into your senior high years in the Fourth Pres Youth,
you have an opportunity to do something really meaningful,
something really important,
something that really makes a difference.

You have a chance to be a youth group that resists being cliquish and exclusive.
That may sound nice here in church,
but it takes awareness and it takes work.
It does not come naturally.

But I would urge you to be on the lookout for cliques in our youth group.
And to consider them as being the work of the devil.

If Fourth Presbyterian's Youth Group could become the sort of fellowship
that doesn't form exclusive cliques,
and doesn't leave people out because they aren't a certain kind of person,
then we will be a Youth Group that is worthy of the name of Jesus.

The only way to do that, of course, is to stay focused on Jesus.
And the way to stay focused on Jesus is to listen to the Word of God,
and to share the Meal in which we remember him.
And that means having your seats in these pews on Sunday mornings.
[And by the way, parents, getting their seats in these pews is still your job!]
It's part of the marathon training required to be the Body of Christ
in any meaningful way.

One of our confirmands tells a story in her statement of faith
about feeling led by Jesus to shine his light.
She saw a student sitting alone in class,
and felt compelled to go sit with this student.
Another student who was grouped up with his exclusive clique saw her do this,
and he felt compelled to leave his clique and join her.
It takes courage to shine the light of Christ in the world.
And it takes trust that Jesus is with you,
and that his light will overcome the darkness.

We are on an amazing journey,
this life we are living, and this faith in which we are growing.
And you never know when Jesus is going to show up.

It will always be a fleeting moment,
because the risen Jesus can never be pinned down,
he cannot be contained,
he is always on the move, bringing life to the world.
And it will usually come as a surprise.

And when Jesus does show up,
our hearts will burn within us with the power of his risen life.

And we will want to share this moment with friends,
friends of Jesus,
friends with whom we are bound together because of Jesus.

I am thankful to be with our Confirmands and this congregation as your pastor and friend,
as we walk on our road to our Emmaus.

Let's go be surprised!