

Road Trip Revelations

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I like this story of the road to Emmaus and the two travelers journeying. There's just something warming and special about it. Like the travelers on the road, once they figure out what's happening, they say, "weren't our hearts burning within us as he spoke?" – that's kinda the feeling I get with this story.

Jesus is there. He's just walking on the road with his companions. He's lighting everything up for them.

But there's one piece of this story I've not really paid any particular attention to. And, in a way, it could be the most important part of this scripture. It's the destination. Where is their destination?

We can say these travelers are on a road to enlightenment. We can say they're on a road to discovery, or on a road walking with Christ. You know, we can say a lot of things. Yet in Scripture, it says they are heading to Emmaus. That is, in the past, nothing more than the name of a town to me.

If we're talking scripturally and biblically and geographically, Emmaus is a town that could have been anywhere from seven miles to around twenty miles away from Jerusalem. So, on foot, this is a significant trek. This is a journey. Whether it's the short version or the long version, it's a journey. Also, considering it says in the passage Jesus opened up all of the scriptures to them, I'm in favor of the twenty-mile interpretation... cause it takes a long time to go from Genesis, all the way through the Law and the prophets and the wisdom writings, to get to Jesus.

But this town Emmaus... What is Emmaus? Not so much, where is Emmaus. That's immaterial at the moment. What is Emmaus? Frederick Buechner had something to say on that. Before I share his words with you though, I want you to remember the events these travelers had experienced in the past few days before this road trip. Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, tried, beaten, and crucified. His body was buried, and the disciples scattered and in hiding. Now, on the morning of this day, the women who were close to Jesus said the tomb was empty and they'd seen angels saying Jesus is alive. There's a lot of intensity happening in Jerusalem as these travelers are heading to Emmaus.

I invite you now to hear Frederick Buechner's words, slightly modified to be more inclusive.

Emmaus is "the place we go to in order to escape – a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, 'Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.' ...Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest

ideas that [people] have had – ideas about love and freedom and justice – have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [persons] for selfish ends.”

What is Emmaus?

Emmaus is a place of retreat, of refuge, of solace, of hiding. One of the thoughts and prayers we read in our Searchers class this morning, from the book Thoughts and Prayers by Cedrick Bridgeforth, our new bishop, was all about our hiding places. Where are our hiding places? For some it's a church. For some it's our beds. For some it's playing with our puppies. For some it's video games. For some it's tinkering with your car or any other hobby we have picked up that allows us to focus and block things out so we can have the semblance of a moment's peace. Some of those Emmauses can be healthy, and some of those Emmauses, not so much.

Still, Emmaus is that place of retreat. So I ask you, what is your Emmaus? I'm not looking for an answer. Just think on that. What is your Emmaus? Where is your Emmaus?

Then I have a second question for you. Who else is on the road with us, traveling to their Emmaus? And how do we walk with them?

There are a couple ways to answer that second question; two interpretations to this Scripture. We read Scripture with this idea, often, of how do we act like Christ? Where do we put ourselves in the story? The first way we might interpret this passage is, 'how do we walk on the road to Emmaus as Christ walked with the travelers?'

This way of looking at the passage puts us in the place of Christ, which is at best problematic. We are not Christ, and we should never put ourselves in the place of Christ in the story. When we do that, it puts us in a place where we assume knowledge we, most likely, do not have. The other thing it does is puts us in a place of undeserved authority and influence. We must be careful and tread cautiously with that.

Now you might say, "But Pastor Tom, there've been times when you have preached 'God does not call the qualified. God qualifies the called.'" It's true. I have preached that and I stand by that. But not on the road to Emmaus. That is not our place on the road to Emmaus.

Here's the second way to interpret this passage. How do we invite Christ to walk alongside us on our road to Emmaus? We're so often concerned with that first interpretation, being Christ to others, we miss opportunities to allow the other to be Christ to us. In this Scripture, it doesn't say Jesus showed up announcing himself. In this passage, the travelers – the believers – invited the stranger, for all intents and purposes, to walk along with them; the stranger whom they did not know was Christ. They listened and they heard. They received what was offered. They exchanged their thoughts and fears for new teaching.

Our place on the road is not to offer. More times than not, our place on the road to Emmaus is to receive. It was the One who was invited who opened the travelers' minds to fuller understanding.

Now, I want you to keep all of that in mind, because there is a way Oregon City United Methodist Church is living this out. Oregon City United Methodist Church, right before COVID hit – so 2019/2020, somewhere in that space – voted to become a Reconciling Congregation. That is a good and wonderful thing. That is an amazing thing. You said let's open the doors to

everyone. And let's show the love of God to everyone. And now it's time to really put that promise into action.

So what does it take to be a Reconciling Congregation?

- First, and this one you've done. Admit, as the Apostle Peter did in Acts 10, "God does not show favoritism, but accepts everyone.
- The second thing is this. Admit we don't fully understand the love of God. Let me say that a little more clearly. There is no way we in our human capacity can have an absolutely full understanding of the love of God and how it works. As believers in Christ and those who trust in the love of God, it is a good, right, holy, and humble thing to say, "I don't get it." Honestly, in the place of seeking and questioning and saying, "I don't know. Lord, help me," that is where you always want to be. Even John Wesley, our founding theologian of the Methodist movement said, we are always moving on to perfection, but we will never get there. And that is a good and holy place to be. We admit that as a Reconciling Congregation.
- Third thing: Invite the stranger to walk with us. We're doing good with that. We can do better. We can do more.
- Fourth: We listen, and hear with our hearts, what our new companions have to teach us.

And if you will extend to me a bit of grace and patients, cause this may be difficult for me to get through, I will give you a testimony to that.

Six years ago, when I came to this state, this area, in 2017 – April 9, 2017 to be exact, just over six years ago – what I had with me was everything I could fit into a minivan. I was in the process of divorcing my wife. I hadn't seen my kids since the previous Christmas. I'd missed Erik's fourth birthday and Giana's first birthday. I had a job lined up but no place to live. I spent that first night in a hotel, and I practically maxed out my credit card to stay in an AirBnB for the next week as I looked for a place to live. Then I spent one more night in a hotel before, by the kindness of an older couple who were members of Gresham United Methodist Church, I had a free home to live in and stay for as long as it took to secure housing for myself.

Where does being a Reconciling Congregation come in? Gresham United Methodist Church, a Reconciling Congregation in this Conference, invited me to be with them. Sure, I'm the one who walked through the doors and I was there. But I was also welcomed. I was accepted. I was invited to walk into that space. I wasn't just another butt in the pew. I was invited onto a journey, and I was given space at the table. I was given freedom to be me, and I was invited to break bread, to tell my story, to offer what I had for the good of the believers.

When our denomination failed in a special called General Conference saying, "No, we do not want to give authority to gay people. We do not want ordained homosexuals or transgender individuals," this Conference said, "To heck with you all. We are still going to show God's love to everyone. We are still going to ordain people in whose lives the Spirit moves. We will not judge them for who they are or how they are created."

Your pastor stands before you because an active Reconciling Congregation walked with me to my Emmaus, and said you are loved, you are accepted, and you are cherished. Then they went

the extra miles. They saw the Good News of loving all, and instead of heading toward the sunset...

Emmaus is west of Jerusalem. When we head toward Emmaus, we are heading into sunset and darkness. Instead of heading into sunset and staying in darkness, they went out potentially into a dangerous place, potentially into a place of sorrow, because at this point when the travelers saw that it was Jesus, and ran back to Jerusalem to tell everybody, they would have been running in the dark. Not just running in the dark, though, but running toward sunrise.

... A Reconciling Congregation, turned around, and went the extra miles toward sunrise, and in that breaking of the bread, in that action, I saw Christ. I experienced God's love, and was resurrected out of my place of rock-bottom.

So, I am inviting you all as a Reconciling Congregation; as a congregation who has said, 'Yes, we believe in this love. Yes, we believe in justice for the marginalized and discriminated against. Yes, we want to build community based on Christ and acceptance and affirmation and love that knows no bounds. And we want to show that love to all communities and walk alongside them.'

As part of that journey, we are forming a Reconciling Ministries Team here at Oregon City United Methodist Church to guide us in that work. Because one of the things about this type of work is it means crossing from white culture into different culture. That is work full of landmines. But by the Spirit of God, by the guidance Christ can give us, and by the love of God, we can navigate that journey together.

I invite you, as travelers on the road to Emmaus, to walk with me and to walk with us. If this is a ministry that you are hearing about and you are feeling your heart strangely warmed – and I'm not just talking to you who are here in-person. I am talking to you who are out there who maybe didn't make it to church this morning, who have joined us online for I don't know how long. I don't care if you're in another state. If this is something that is warming your heart, I invite you into this journey, into the discussion, into the dialogue to see where we can journey together and take this good news of Christ, to hear what the stranger has to offer us. And when they are invited to our table, we can recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread, be filled with joy and awe, and then run the extra miles through night toward sunrise to proclaim it to the world, to this community, to our church and those who continue to want to disaffiliate, to other denominations who continue to exclude and forget that Christ said, "Love thy neighbor." Not, 'love thy neighbor, but...' 'Love thy neighbor always!'

I invite you into that good, holy, daringly bold... and humble... and a little bit scary... work of reconciliation.

In Jesus holy name. Amen.