

“WALKING THE ROAD TOGETHER”

Luke 24:13-35 April 30th, 2017

In April I celebrate the birthdays of both my daughters, Wendy and Margie. These are always special times, even though they are both grown women now. But when they were little, they could hardly wait for the big day to arrive. It seemed like it would never come! And now my granddaughter, Heather, is really looking forward to her twenty-first birthday arriving in December.

Shirley Coleman from Riverton, Utah (Country Magazine, April/May) has this story to tell: The fourth birthday of my 3-year old daughter, Amanda, was approaching. I reminded her that the day was on its way. After a couple of weeks, Amanda became exasperated, stomped her foot and with her hands on her hips asked, ‘Well, is it coming in the front door or the back door?’”

Last week in the first sermon of this miniseries on “Awakening,” we talked about awakening to ministry. Specifically, we talked about awakening ourselves to the holy work of sharing peace and offering forgiveness. We talked about how this work is for us all. Absolving others is not relegated only to ordained clergy. Offering forgiveness is not sacramental work. Jesus gives the authority to offer this ministry to all people who would take up their own cross and follow him.

This week we are awakening to the meaning of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Often, when we think about stories from the Scriptures that speak to the practice of the Lord’s Supper, we may limit our range to the traditional texts associated with the holy meal: the institution narratives in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three Gospel writers, along with Paul in 1Corinthians, give an account of how Jesus gathered in the Upper Room with his disciples on the night

he was betrayed, possibly as part of the annual celebration of Passover. At the meal, he took break, gave thanks to God, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take, eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And after supper was over he took a glass of wine, gave thanks to God, gave it to his disciples and said, “Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you. Drink this in remembrance of me.”

But there are other stories from Scripture besides these well-known ones that inform our practice of Holy Communion. These include the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes, John’s account of the risen Lord Jesus preparing fish for the disciples on the shores of Lake Galilee, and today’s story of the risen Lord Jesus appearing to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is to this story and how it awakens us to greater understanding of our holy meal to which I would like to turn our attention.

Dr. Heather Murray-Elkins spoke a few years ago at a minister’s convocation. She was talking about United Methodists and the Lord’s Supper. She talked about how in today’s world, so many families no longer gather around a table to share a meal on a regular basis. Maybe with all of the newfound interest in cooking and services that deliver ingredients and instructions of how to cook them to our doorsteps and the rise of take-home meals in grocery stores, this could be changing. But I suspect that even if some families engage in this practice, it may not happen more than once a day. We are more likely to stop at A&W or Subway if we just don’t feel like cooking.

The Rev. Dawn Chesser shares some regrets for times in the past where meals were a time for the family to be together.

She writes: Gone are the days of my mother's childhood when she and her siblings would be late for school because they were reading Upper Room devotions at the family breakfast table. Gone are the days when all family members are expected to be home for dinner every evening at 6:00 pm. Gone are the days when hands are held and meals are blessed before stories of the day's events. Gone are the days when my husband and I even sit down at our smaller kitchen table to dine. Our table has been in the refinishing shop for six months and we've barely missed it. It is so much easier to plop down in front of the television with just the two of us here.

Dr. Murray Elkins' point was not simply to grouse about how sad it is that the world has changed and families no longer sit down together around tables to eat. Her point was to suggest that the whole basis for understanding what is going on at the Lord's Table is dependent upon everyone having a baseline established through regular prayer around the family dining table.

The prayer that Jesus offered at the Last Supper was not a new prayer that he made up on the fly to fit the context. He took an old form, a Jewish blessing that would have been used in family homes, and he adapted it. In doing this, he gave it an entirely new meaning. Jesus took ordinary staple foods—bread and wine—and by adding holy words and ritual actions—take, bless, break, give—turned a regular meal into a sacrament.

Notice that this four part pattern of take, bless, break and give appears not just in the familiar narratives on the Last Supper, but also in the feeding to the multitudes and around the table in Emmaus: "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" (Luke 24:30, NRSV).

It was in the ritual pattern of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving that the multitudes were fed. It was in the ritual pattern of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving that the disciples' eyes were opened and their minds awakened so that they were able to recognize who was sitting at their dining room table. It was the ritual action of take, bless, break, give that made their hearts burn anew about the words he had spoken as they walked along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

Our current Prayer of Great Thanksgiving reflects decades of work undertaken by Methodists in conversation with our ecumenical partners following the sweeping changes of Vatican II. Our current pattern reflects the shape that we see in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Ron Anderson writes,

Traveling the road to Emmaus, the disciples are joined by the risen Christ. Jesus interprets the Scriptures to them and then eats with them. It is in the breaking, blessing, and sharing of bread that the disciples' eyes are opened and they recognize Jesus. The disciples return to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news of Jesus' resurrection...

Within [the] basic pattern of Word and Table, the pattern for the service of the Table reflects the four fold shape we see in the accounts of the meals Jesus shared with his disciples: Jesus (1) takes the bread and cup, (2) blesses God or gives thanks to God, (3) breaks the bread and pours the cup, and (4) gives the bread and cup to his disciples. The church through the centuries has understood Jesus' command to "do this" to include not only the breaking and giving of the bread and cup but also the taking and blessing or giving thanks to God for what the church has received and continues to receive from God in creation, redemption, and sanctification. In taking and blessing (thanksgiving), we prepare the table and ourselves as we would for any meal. On

the other hand, this preparation involves the preparation of our hearts and minds, so that we may know that Christ is present with us in our sharing of the bread and cup with one another. In breaking and giving (communion) we are confronted with the practical necessity of breaking the bread in order to share it with one another. We are reminded that, as Jesus broke the bread in anticipation of the breaking of his body for the world, Jesus continues to offer his broken body to us for our healing and the healing of the world (E, Byron Anderson, The Meaning of Holy Communion in the United Methodist Church. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2014, pages 10-12).

In the Emmaus Resurrection story, we have a powerful and moving picture of Jesus coming alongside two of his disciples on the road (and notice that they are not of the inner circle of the apostles). He walks with them; he is concerned about their sadness, and he continues to be their teacher as he was in life.

He responds to their desire for his continued company –“stay with us”—and joins them for a meal. In the familiar gesture of taking, blessings, and breaking bread, at last their eyes are opened, and they recognize their companion on the road. Then they can recognize also that he had kindled their hearts in his teaching on the scriptures, in the way he helped them to see afresh the familiar stories of the patriarchs and prophets and the history of their people.

This story of the road to Emmaus can also be a marvelous parable for the Christian life. While most of us will have times set aside for prayer, for coming together in worship and fellowship, perhaps for solitude or for study, most of it happens “on the road.” As we travel, we can be preoccupied with our own interpretation of what is happening to us and around us, trying to make the best sense of it that we can, but remaining blind to the ways in which Jesus comes alongside

us and travels with us. As he travels with us, he makes himself known in word and sacrament—in the opening of the scriptures, and the breaking of the bread.

Jesus is, of course, the most important companion on our journey, but he is not the only one. We are given our families and friends and fellow Christians—those who support and challenge and teach us—and not only those who are physically present with us, but also those who have taken the journey before us and have recorded something of what they discovered. The company of our fellow travelers extends through time and space, and we never travel alone, however it may feel.

Christ walks with us, even when we are unaware of his presence; Christ stays with us when we offer hospitality to strangers; Christ opens our eyes to divine presence when we break bread together. Amen and amen.