

“How Slow of Heart?”

Luke 24:13-35 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might listen to you and welcome you wherever we meet you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The “Walk to Emmaus” story is one of my favorite Easter stories. Do you have a favorite Easter story? There’s no reason why you have to pick just one, but I encourage, during this Easter season, to read through the ends of our four gospels and see which stories grab you. I think I’ve appreciated this one over the years largely because of the way Jesus is revealed in the breaking of the bread. We Disciples love our bread breaking, after all! But as I read the story this year, I was struck by a different surprising transformation, one that comes a little earlier in the story.

Part of what makes this story dramatic is that we know things the disciples in the story don’t. They meet Jesus, and we know who he is, but “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” So now we’re set up to wait in anticipation for the big reveal. In the meantime, their ignorance creates some humorous literary tension, because of the stupid things it makes them do. They’re walking along the road out of Jerusalem, and they meet a stranger. “Whatcha talking about?” the stranger asks. And then one of the most dramatic lines: “They stood still, looking sad.” Ach. You can feel their pain, can’t you? And yet, we know that the One asking the question has experienced that pain at a far more intense level than they can imagine.

The farce continues, as Cleopas opens his mouth. “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn’t know what’s going on?” And then he proceeds to explain Jesus to Jesus. Yes, you heard that right: He explains Jesus to Jesus. What’s awkward about this situation is that Cleopas and his companion are violating the rules of the Ring Theory of Grief. Ring Theory has only been given a name in the last decade, but the principles are fairly intuitive¹. The idea is that when someone is going through a hard time – say for instance, getting crucified – that person is in the center of concentric rings. In the next ring out are that person’s closest family members and friends, then other family, then acquaintances, and then everyone else. The rules are that in any given crisis, you need to identify which ring you’re in, in relation to the person affected, and make sure you direct only comfort toward those in the rings closer to the center; if you need to vent or whine about the situation, you direct that toward the outer rings, people who are less impacted than you are. Makes sense, right? Cleopas was violating the rules of Ring Theory by telling Jesus all about how hard Jesus’ crucifixion was for him and his friends. Obviously, in his defense, he didn’t realize who he was talking to, but he had to feel kind of dumb about it later, don’t you think?

In his response, Jesus uses this phrase that struck me, “How slow of heart [you are] to believe!” In the immediate context, it’s an exclamation, but I would suggest that for us, it’s a question. How slow of heart will we be? Clearly, we could apply this

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-xpm-2013-apr-07-la-oe-0407-silk-ring-theory-20130407-story.html>

Ring Theory analysis of the story to any of the multiple situations grieving that are taking place in our lives today. But in this difficult week, as the trial of Derek Chauvin was wrapping up, and Daunte Wright was shot by a police officer mere miles away from that Minnesota courtroom, and the video of 13-year-old Adam Toledo's killing in Chicago was released, I need to apply the dynamic to what's happening with race in America. I know this is uncomfortable for many of us, but to not talk about it is far more damaging to those most directly affected. To be clear, what I have to say about this is mostly for those of us who are white; it is my hope that what I share will bring relief and comfort to those of you who are not white. I step into this advisedly, knowing the perils of trying to apply gospel teachings to systems of bias that I remain trapped in myself, but I cannot keep silent. The lessons we will pull from the "Walk to Emmaus" story today are certainly not everything we need to cover, but I do think they are helpful, as we strive to become an anti-racist church and anti-racist people, or in other words, to live as Easter people.

What feels relevant to me is a dynamic that has probably always been in operation, but has emerged with greater enthusiasm this past year, when as media outlets often put it, "America has been dealing with a racial reckoning on a level not seen since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s." White people have been having our eyes opened to the realities, injustices and horrors of systemic racism in our country. We've been seeing videos of brutality we've never experienced or worried about. We've been learning and speaking up and protesting like never before. And

while one of the guidelines we're taught is to follow the lead of people of color, we've often failed at that and gotten quite ahead of ourselves instead. Call it the enthusiasm of the new convert, but when White passion for anti-racism work is allowed to flail around like a wrecking ball, it's just as likely to damage people of color as it is to dismantle White supremacy. It's like Cleopas trying to explain Jesus to Jesus. It's a violation of the rules of Ring Theory. Probably none of us is doing it all the time, but most of us have the capacity to do it sometimes. We need to be mindful so we can avoid pulling a Cleopas.

I bring this up not to imply that White people trying to work on becoming anti-racist is a hopeless cause, but to set us up for what comes next in the story. We may make these same bungling errors that the disciples on the road to Emmaus did. But we can learn from them about how to do better, based on what they did after that. It seems these two disciples had barely set out from Jerusalem when they ran into Jesus, so if Emmaus was seven miles away, they had about two hours of walking ahead of them. And it seems that Jesus did most of the talking after Cleopas' initial attempt at explaining what was going on.

So here we have step number one: if we want to provide support and assistance to those who have been traumatized, we need to begin with listening to them deeply. We don't take the first bit of information we can grab and run with it. We don't post upsetting videos of violence and talk about how they make us feel, without thought for the impact those videos may have on those who live that reality daily. We sit with

these stories of grief and fear and violence. We listen to them, from multiple different sources. We hold space for them and make clear the sacred nature of these narratives of pain. We come with our hearts humbled by the honor of having someone share their vulnerability and trauma with us. And when the pain of these stories threatens to overwhelm us, we don't turn to those same people of color and ask them to comfort us. We don't minimize the impact or take a stance of skepticism, "waiting to hear all the information," to make ourselves feel better. We engage the rules of Ring Theory and find ways to process our response that don't inflict further damage.

The first step is deep listening. The second step involves even deeper engagement. When Cleopas and his companion arrived at their destination, it almost seemed as though the interaction was going to end without Jesus ever being revealed. But the disciples chose to pursue the possibilities by extending hospitality to this stranger whose teachings were making their hearts burn. "Stay with us, because it is almost evening." Nighttime was not a safe time to be out on the road. Who could say what dangers might have been in store for this stranger, had he kept going? It had been a long walk; he was, no doubt, as hungry as they were. So they invited him into their home to break bread.

Our faith has a long history of recognizing that it's by sharing meals that we truly get to know one another on a heart level. This story is probably a huge part of that tradition. There is so much we learn from eating together, on levels beyond what words can teach us. If White people want to join people of color in dismantling the

systemic racism that pervades our whole society, much of the learning we will need will only happen at this “breaking bread” level. It’s about literally sharing meals, yes, but it’s also about the level of trust and openness that characterizes our commitments and our relationships. It’s about having listened closely enough that those who have been broken feel comfortable breaking bread with us. It’s about being willing to accept that we do not have all the necessary nourishment, even if we’re the ones who set the table.

It's important to note here that we cannot approach this expecting the people of color around us to take on the role of sacrificial lamb. Whether they choose to risk engaging with those whose first tendency is to explain their pain to them is up to them. Only Jesus was called to be Jesus. This is an analogy, not a prescription. Nobody should have to suffer for us to commit our hearts to the transformative power of love that overcomes death. Rather, this story invites those of us who have so much to learn to watch for opportunities to offer hospitality to those who have been broken, to listen to them deeply and break bread with them as possible, so that our eyes might be opened. How slow of heart will we be? It is a question each of us must answer for ourselves. Let us give thanks that Jesus is our companion on the journey! Hallelujah and Amen!