

May 03, 2020

Preacher: Rev. Jay Anderson

Series: -Easter Season Series - The Heart of the Matter

Detail:

5-3-20 Sermon "Straight From the Heart"

Singer Bryan Adams had a hit in the early 80s with the song, "Straight From the Heart," which, I'm sure, many of you remember. It's a plaintive song about lost love, sung by a broken-hearted lover who wants, more than anything, to start over again, but wants to hear from his lover whether that's even possible - straight from the heart. It's a song of hope; hope lost, hope sought for, and perhaps, hope regained.

Our reading from Luke today is of the same vein.

The four saddest, most heartbreaking, and perhaps realistic words in this entire passage - maybe in all of Scripture - are found in the middle of this reading - "But we had hoped." So much is said in just those four words about dreams that were dashed, promises that perished, hopes that became hollow. A future once bright with hope lies dead on the ash heap. And there are few things more tragic than a dead future. David Lose reminds us of the time when Ernest Hemingway, challenged to compose a short-story in only six words, penned these haunting and heart wrenching words: "For Sale: baby shoes, never used." It's not just the tragedy of what happened that tears us apart, but the gaping hole of what could have happened, what might have been, that never will. That is the tragedy.

And that is where we find these two disciples, one named, one unnamed, who have left Jerusalem on the evening of Easter Sunday to return home to Emmaus. We don't know why they chose to go while the others stayed

behind, but we know that this is what ate through them as they made this seven mile journey. And I imagine that their trek was laced with long periods of silence, perhaps occasional expressions of disbelief, and a mix of soulful tears. They are joined on the walk, at some point, by a stranger - at least he appeared a stranger - who asked what they were talking about. Amazed that he can be coming from Jerusalem as they were and not know what had happened there, they share the drama of the weekend's events, their loss and pain pouring straight from their wounded hearts in the telling. And in the telling, the words, "But we had hoped..." revealed the depth of their pain, their loss, their despair. And these words ring true to us. They're not the only truth, of course, there is much in this life that is beautiful, daring, bold, confident, and inspiring, but they stand alongside disappointment, and loss, and heartbreak, and failure, and hopelessness.

This pandemic and all that has happened as a result has revealed a certain amount of hopelessness as well as a sense of hope. We think about the season of Lent and the beautiful worship we had prepared for in the church that was suddenly taken away. We consider the beauty of the sanctuary, with the Easter paraments and flowers, that has only been seen in videos and photos, or the wonderful music of our singers and choirs that we've only been able to hear in less-than-ideal recordings. We think of the children that we didn't get to see in their Easter finery, the Easter Egg Hunts that didn't happen, the Holy Week Worship that we were forced to experience through our computer screens rather than in the warm community of our church family. And it's all heartbreaking. Not being with family during this time, not getting to see our kids and our grandkids, our parents and grandparents, our friends from school and from work, and not being able to gather with our church family for worship, for M&Ms, for Sunday School or anything like that just builds the sense of loss.

And that doesn't even take into consideration the people, the family members and friends and co-workers whom we have lost to this virus or during this time of shut-down. We've lost not only our loved ones, but we've also sacrificed or deferred the ritual through which we celebrate their lives and their memories, at least for now. Our young people have had stripped from them some of the milestones that mark important and hard-earned passages in their lives, like graduation ceremonies. Those words, "But we had hoped," could be our words as easily as they are those of Cleopas and his companion. Hope that is lost is not easily regained. Hearts that are broken are not quickly mended. This story...this is our story.

And I say all of this, recounting only some of what has been lost, knowing that we are people of faith, people of hope; we are resurrection people, we are the Easter people! We are people who lean on our faith when we go through difficult times, people who have a church family, a faith community to help us get through the difficult, hopeless times that are part and parcel of life sometimes. What about those in our communities, those in our workplaces and schools, those in our own families who don't have that faith to fall back on? How do those folks cope? How do they manage? How do they do more than merely survive? How do they maintain hopefulness in a season of heartbreak? And what are we called to do as the body of Christ in order to share our hope, to be the sign of Christ's hope, for a world that is, more and more, looking for answers - as we suggested last week - in all the wrong places? How do we share the good news of hope that comes in Jesus in ways that meets people where they are?

That's what Jesus does in this passage - he meets the disciples right where they are, he meets them on the way. He doesn't come to them in Jerusalem.

He doesn't wait for them at home in Emmaus. He meets them where they are and as they are - on the road, amid their journey, right smack in the middle of all the pain, frustration, and despondency that threatens to overwhelm them.

And they don't recognize him. Blinded by their grief and loss, stricken by their despair, they can't see who it is that walks beside them.

As they walk together, as they talk together, Jesus breaks open the Scriptures for them, as one commentator described it, "helping them to make sense of recent events in light of Scripture, but also make sense of all of Scripture — and indeed, all of life! — in light of God's redemptive work in and through the cross."^[1] After he breaks open the Word for them, Jesus then breaks bread with them. Arriving at their destination, Jesus begins as if to be going on, but the two disciples invite him to stay, to join them for a meal. And it is at the table, when Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them - the four movements we see enacted in the sacrament of Holy Communion - that their eyes are opened and that they see that their companion is, in fact, Jesus, the subject of their hope. And in the receiving of the gift of this meal at the table, the Lord Jesus vanishes from their sight, even as his presence overflows their hearts.

More than John Wesley's confession, in hearing Scripture made real for him, that his heart was "strangely warmed," these two disciples proclaim that in hearing Jesus break open and interpret Scripture to them, their hearts were "burning." God had touched them in such a way that they knew they would never be the same, they could never go back to the way they were before. In fact, they couldn't even sit still - they immediately packed up and began the return journey to Jerusalem in order to share the good news of Jesus' presence with the disciples they had left behind. Their hearts burned to share this good news of renewed hope, to be in the midst of a community where they knew their hope would be manifest!

This, this is our story. All of us, at one time or another, have felt our hearts on fire because God has touched us in some way. Maybe it was on a retreat, or in a Bible study, perhaps it was while visiting a family at the birth of a new child or in caring for a friend dealing with the pain of death. Perhaps your

heart was inflamed during a particular worship service - perhaps around the table - when God's Spirit, like a Pentecost flame, leaped from the preacher's lips into your breast and burned with a flame that will never be quenched. This is our story, and what we do with it is our answer, our response, to God's call in our lives.

Consider, if you will, the shape of this story and the shape of our worship. The two were walking down the road together when Jesus joined them on their journey, right? That mirrors the Gathering movement in our worship, what we're calling Spending Time as we consider the theme scripture for our series about the early church from Acts. Jesus then interprets the Scripture to them - helping them to understand the greater story of God's work in the world and the particular story of God's work through Jesus. This is the Receiving the Word movement, or the Breaking Open the Word portion of our worship gathering. Then what happens? Jesus breaks bread with them around the table. This is their Response to the Word, the third movement of worship that we call Praising God in this series. And then finally, after the Word has been revealed to them, what do these two disciples do? They Scatter. They go. They get on their feet and go to share the good news with other. They have goodwill. I'm telling you, this story is OUR story.

So let me ask you this. When we are on the other side of all of this self-isolating, social-distancing, hand-washing ad infinitum, mask-wearing, video-worshipping period, when we begin to emerge from the tomb, or perhaps womb, of our own isolation and gather together again, what might it look like for breaking bread and breaking open the Word to become a key part of how we reach out to those in our community who don't have the foundation of faith to help them through that we rely on? Put another way, how can we make this story, our story, their story? How can we, using the table ministry that Jesus used so effectively, model our own community

outreach - bringing hope to the hopeless - to invite our brothers and sisters from our community around Christ's table as well?

What might God do here, at Church of the Master, if, rather than trying to schedule a couple of mass feeding-of-the-five-thousand type events over the course of the year, instead, we invited whoever God's Spirit reached out to to join us around the table on a more regular basis where we could break bread together? What might happen if we were to meet people where they are, break open the Scriptures so that they can make sense of their own lives in light of God's love and mercy, gather them to a meal, that they might experience and be nourished by Christ's own presence, and then send them on their way, back into the world to partner in God's work and to share in God's grace? Would that be living out the Gospel? Would that be sharing the good news?

I believe that there is a new spark that is just ready to ignite the fire of HOPE that continues to burn in this church, in new and innovative ways.

I believe this passage of scripture, at this point in time, in the midst of all that is going on right now, is God's invitation to us to do and be the church in all new ways for all new people who will come out on the other side of this pandemic and think, "I don't ever want to have to go through something like that... alone... again."

Those four words from the very heart of our reading for today, "But we had hope," are not the last words of THIS story or of OUR story. What WE do on the other side, what we do to transform broken hearts into burning hearts, is our proclamation of faith. Jesus' table ministry was a primary way that he showed and shared a depth of love unseen in his time. He ate and spent time with those others considered unworthy of his attention. It was at tables that he invited people to open up and share "straight from the heart"—getting right to the heart of the matter. As we gather at table today - Christ's table

in your table - we remember that, at the heart, his message was unconditional love. To offer ourselves “straight from the heart” is the seed of hope God planted in us, and this is the growth we must continue to nurture, in ourselves and others, as God’s Easter people. Amen.

^[1] workingpreacher.org, Commentary on Luke 24 by David Lose, Accessed April 27, 2020.