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# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“The Road to Emmaus”

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*Luke 24:13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17 And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" 19 He asked them, "What things?"*

*They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. 22 Moreover, some women in our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23 and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. 24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." 25 Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

*Luke 24:28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29 But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So, he went in to stay with them. 30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 32 They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"*

## *The Road to Emmaus*

Lead in. One of the things that I love about the Gospels is that each has its own unique, signature ending.

For Matthew, it's the commissioning of the disciples as evangelists, as they are sent out into the world to baptize in Jesus' name and make disciples of all nations.

For Mark, it's the striking admission of the disciples' fear and silence in response to the news of the resurrection.

For John, it's that classic, back-and-forth conversation, where Jesus asks Peter three times, "do you love me," and then sends him off with the words: feed my sheep.

But as a Christian educator, it's the ending of Luke's Gospel that most interest me. There we find Jesus in the role of teacher, giving what might well have been the first and greatest Sunday School lesson of all time.

As the passage begins, two individuals I suspect it's a couple are on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

And on that first Easter afternoon, Jesus approaches these two travelers and asks them what they are talking about. Not initially recognizing him, they recount some of the events of recent days. The news that Jesus had been before Pilate. That he had been condemned and died. And now some were even talking about an empty tomb.

Suddenly, Jesus interrupts, and "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explains to them how the writings of Israel's scriptures, what we know as the Old Testament, relate to and reveal his own life and resurrection.

I don't know how long this Sunday School lesson would have lasted. Perhaps Jesus lectured for hours as they meandered towards Emmaus. Or perhaps, like a good TED talk speaker, Jesus gave the talk of his life in 20 minutes or less.

In either case, on that dusty road to Emmaus, as these disciples heard the scriptures explained, these two individuals took their first steps towards in their

education as followers of Christ. That road to Emmaus was a road to faith formation.

Where did your road to Emmaus begin?

For me, it began quite literally, on a highway; I-95 to be exact.

I grew up Catholic and that core of faith that was formed in my early years was later nurtured through a college campus ministry. But by the time I graduated and began my first career as, believe it or not, a college wrestling coach, I had not yet had any significant experience studying scripture or learning about my faith.

So, when I found out that the University that I worked for offered a tuition reimbursement program for its employees, I jumped at the chance to enroll in a few courses at a nearby seminary.

Life was busy, and it was often the case that the only time I had to study was on long bus trips to away wrestling matches.

I would pack my books along with my workout gear, and as the bus traversed up and down I-95, I would study. First Greek, and then Hebrew. I like I learned NT somewhere between Hartford and Boston, and in a traffic jam outside of Annapolis.

It was during these bus trips, with a bunch of wrestlers, that I fell in love with Scripture and began to see for the first time how and why theology could matter to my everyday life.

As it was for me, and as it was for those two disciples, our road to faith formation is a road we intentionally follow. But it also is a road filled with unexpected turns and surprising travel companions. It is the road we take, but it also a road that takes hold of us and leaves us transformed.

For those first two disciples, the transformation doesn't happen immediately. Their eyes are opened, and their hearts are warmed not during Jesus' lesson or even immediately after. Rather, it's sometime later. It's when they arrive in Emmaus, sit down with Jesus for dinner, and he takes the bread, and breaks it,

and blesses it, and gives it to the disciples. It is only then that what Jesus had said earlier sinks in and they recognize this stranger as the risen Christ.

How do we make sense of this delayed reaction?

Well, on the one hand, when it comes to faith formation, the results are not always immediate. There's the child of the church, who goes away to college, loses touch with his faith, only to come back and reconnect later in life, when he has kids of his own and remembers what it meant for him to be brought up in the church. Or there are the women who hear these church bells ring every day on the hour, who knows of your music and your engagement with the University, but who only after a season of loss and grief walks in these doors to find refuge for her weary soul.

In God's economy, seeds of faith can lie dormant for a long time.

But I think there's another way we can understand the delayed transformation of these two disciples. Notice that is not a scene of just any table, or any meal. The language of breaking bread, blessing it, and giving it to his disciples is Eucharistic language. It's a foreshadowing of the communion table, a table, that is meant to bring us together, to unify us, even in the midst of conflict, and pain, and disagreement. It is only there, in the presence of Christ and in fellowship with one another that even the best education becomes a tool of faith formation.

Thanks be to God that the road to Emmaus is not one we take alone.

Now, with the 30 minutes remaining in this sermon you preach for 45 minutes, right Amy? I want to think together about what it means to for you personally, and this church as a whole, to be on the road to Emmaus.

How does this text invite us to think differently about Christian education, and where might it take us in our own pursuit of faith formation?

First, this text invites us to see theological education, by which I mean the intentional study of Scripture and reflection on theology, as essential to how we are as followers of Christ.

When I say the word theological education, most people think about seminaries or divinity schools and the various degree programs that they have to offer.

In this understanding, theological education is a form of professional training for ministers, something necessary to prepare them for their work and their ordination.

Theological education is certainly this. But also I think it is possible to see theological education as something broader and more essential to faith formation. In many ways, I think this text invites us to see theological as an act of discipleship intended for all believers.

Recall that Jesus' earliest followers weren't called Christians. They were called disciples. And in Greek, the word for disciple refers to one who engages in learning and study under the guidance of a teacher. To be a disciple from the very beginning has always meant to be a pupil of Christ, a student of Scripture.

In fact in the Bible, conversion is almost always followed by the intentional study. This is true of the apostle Paul. We all know well his story of being converted on the Road to Damascus. But later, in Galatians, we learn that Paul spent three years in Arabia immediately afterward. What happened during those years we can't know for sure, but many scholars have suggested that this was a period of study and learning.

A similar practice is evident in the early church. Converts to Christianity, even before they joined the church or were baptized, would enter a rigorous process of instruction called the Catechumenate. You know that word from catechesis, which means teaching.

The catechumenate included teaching on a wide range of topics and could last 2 or even 3 years. It culminated on the Saturday before Easter when the catechumens were baptized and officially welcomed as members of the church.

Now, I'm not suggesting that new member classes at the church of the covenant should last three years. But here's what I think is clear from Scripture and the practice of the early church:

The road to Damascus, that is, the road to conversion and church membership, was always meant to lead to the Road to Emmaus.

This doesn't mean that we all should quit our jobs and enroll in seminary. After all, Jesus doesn't invite these two disciples to leave the road to Emmaus, follow him to the seminary in Jericho and enroll in his fall semester course. NO, Jesus the road on which they were traveling became a mobile classroom, as they learned and studied within the rhythms of their daily lives.

But I think this passage does challenge us to see serious biblical and theological training not just as something the people up here do because they are called to be pastors, but as something we all pursue because we are called to be followers of Christ.

Second, I think Luke 24 invites us to think differently about the questions we pursue in our faith formation.

In my experience teaching in both the church and the seminary, we so often get stuck approaching education for Christians in terms of information, content that has to be conveyed or ready-made answers that have to be learned. Like, who was the great-grandson of Hezekiah? What's the first question in the Heidelberg Confession? In what year did Martin Luther write his 95 theses?

Knowing the answer to these questions about the Bible, theology, and church history has some value for sure. But what is interesting to note is that on that road to Emmaus, Jesus doesn't offer those two travelers a bunch of information or answers to memorize.

Rather he gives them a way to understand the facts they already knew. They already knew of Jesus' death, resurrection, what they needed was a lens through which they could understand it and relate it to their lives.

When Jesus opens the scriptures with them, I think what he is doing is helping these two move from the "What?" questions, to the "So what?" questions. The What questions are preoccupied with facts and information, with answers and content, while the so what questions focus on the meaning and significance of that content for our lives.

In today's day and age, anyone can look up who Hezekiah's great-grandson is (it's Josiah by the way; you can google the other answers). It's the so what questions that require space for exploration. For it is in answering this question that we come to wrestling with how this strange and sacred text we call Scripture shapes our self-understanding, and equips us to interact thoughtfully and constructively with the complex world in which we live.

The so what questions are at the heart of what makes education transformational. They are not just the application of the answers, but they are the starting point for our questions.

When I teach in churches, one of the questions I do at the outset of a study is to invite congregants to name the "So what?" questions they bring with them to that space. Sometimes these are about the texts themselves. Sometimes it's about how to bridge from the ideas of Scriptures to the issues in our world. And sometimes it's a connection that I would never have arrived at myself. What raising these questions does is to transform our time together from being about education to exploration.

What are the so what questions that you bring to this space this morning? What are the so what questions that are bubbling to the surface in this community? Here in University Circle? At the University? And how do you create space, in your ministries and in your life together, where such questions are validated and can be explored openly?

On the Road to Emmaus, God does not call us to be Bible scholars or theological experts. That's never been a requirement for leadership in the church, let alone corporate worship. But God does call us to be curious about our faith and lean into the so what questions not only so that we might be transformed, but also so that this church might be a space for exploration for believer and seekers alike.

Third and finally. This text invites us to think of education as a vital form of outreach to the world.

In the past several decades, I believe the church has made a grave miscalculation. In the hopes of attracting the un-churched and of being hospitable to non-believers, we have often thought that what is needed is to make Christianity

easier. To simplify theology, to reduce the gospel to a few platitudes, to offer coffee and casual conversation to the exclusion of intellectual engagement.

There are no doubt good intentions here, but what this strategy overlooks is the fact that many people avoid the church because of unanswered questions they have about scripture and theology.

This is especially true of the often talked about Millennials. It's not so much that this generation has grown disinterested in all things spiritual, though they often are accused of that by Gen-Xers and Boomers; rather, they have grown dissatisfied with the watered down answers and half-truths that popular Christianity has tended to offer.

Put bluntly; If we ask visitors to check their brains at the front door, it won't take long for them to leave through the back door and never return.

I believe there is a hunger in this world and in this community for serious theological engagement. People are dissatisfied with Christianity lite. People want to know how to deal with difficult biblical texts about violence and holy war, they want to know how to fill out theological half-truths, they want to know What the Bible has to say about refugees and racism, poverty and political incivility.

To be sure, there aren't simple answers to these topics. But Friends, I believe that now, perhaps even more than at any other point in Christian history, we must dare to elevate our discourse beyond platitudes and clichés, we must dare to engage difficult questions about Scripture with intellectual honesty. If we do so, we might well find that Christian education done well could become the church's most effective tool for evangelism in the 21st century.

What would it look like for The Church of the covenant to be a church on the road to Emmaus?

On that first Easter Sunday, those two disciples knew where they were headed, but I suspect that they had no idea where that road would take them.

Where would the road to faith formation take you?

Amen