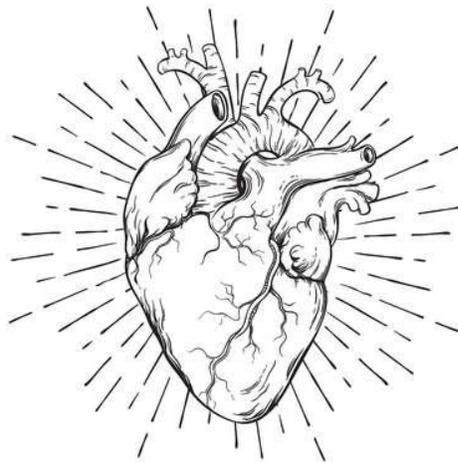


February 24, 2019
7th Sunday after Epiphany

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“The Why”
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Luke 24:13-16 & 28-32

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about eight miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him....

...As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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. 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; and he vanished from their sight. 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?"

This is the word of the lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Why

At the age of 60, Keith Short, was in the middle of the routine workout of lifting weights, walking and running three miles on the treadmill. As he was finishing, he felt a sudden pain in his chest area. 'Maybe I pulled a muscle,' he thought. He finished his workout, but his symptoms only continued to get worse. What he should have called 911 immediately. Instead what he did was to get into his truck and drive about a mile and a half home. Once home the pain and sweat continued to increase. At this point, his wife took control and drove them, about five miles, to the closest hospital. When they entered the ER, the medical staff rushed him to a room and on to a bed where they began to give him lifesaving medications and did an EKG. Eventually, Keith was life-flighted to another hospital that was better suited to care for him.

It might be fitting that today, the last Sunday of ordinary time; we are hearing an Easter story. In the midst of the extended dreary days of winter that seem to stretch on and on; we begin to look for glimpses of the coming spring and the promise of new life that is brought by the extending daylight, crocus, daffodils, and tulips poking through the frozen earth. This morning we hear a story that gives us hope for what is to come. For the past number of weeks, we have heard about Paul's trials and tribulations we have been witnessed to how early adopters of this new way of living negotiated what it truly means to be a person who follows Christ, which is not all that different from conversations the Church is involved in right now.

Yet this morning we come back to a Jesus story, a resurrection story, which reveals the power and mystery of God, who encounters people in the middle of their ordinary life. We heard a story where once again God, reminds us that no matter what we do, no matter how far we stray, God is still present even if we have no idea that God is there. This morning we encounter the story of two disciples. Now scholars suppose that these two disciples were married because in the text, one is named and one stays anonymous. In the time and culture that this story is embedded that would typically indicate the presence of a woman — a person not named. We can safely assume that because they are walking together that they are married — that would be the only situation that a man and woman would be walking together. These two disciples are venturing out of the safety

and seclusion that the other disciples are in as they begin to walk the eight-mile road to Emmaus, a three hour Journey. And that is when they encounter Christ.

Keith, in the middle of a cardiac event, landed at the next hospital, all alone. He was rushed from the helicopter into a waiting Cath Lab, where the medical team found that his left anterior descending artery – the one doctor’s call “the widow maker” -- was 99 percent blocked.

We encounter the disciples, alone, walking to Emmaus, In the midst of their own spiritual heart attack. They are so wrapped up in the “stuff” that lead up to that moment, the abandonment, torture, extra-judicial killing, and now the body of Jesus was missing, presumed stolen from the tomb they had laid him in three days before. Wrapped up in their emotions of anxiety, fear, and anger they were so distracted that they could not see the face of Christ in the stranger that they encountered along their route even.

Three weeks ago, sitting in the Heines Spiritual Center in downtown Houston, I realized that I was one of those disciples who were so wrapped up in their own emotions, that I failed to see God standing right in front of me, guiding me forward. In the middle of my path, I realized that I was having a spiritual heart attack. In the anxiety of our present moment here at Church of the Covenant and in the busyness of my life I was not focused on my why.

Each of us has a why. It is the thing that gives each one of us energy and purpose. It is the thing that gives life and fuels our partnership with God in God's dream. Each of us have two hearts; we have our anatomical hearts that lives in our thoracic cavity providing the life-giving rhythm of blood pumping throughout our body. The other heart, our spiritual heart, lives deep in the core of our being. This heart is priming the essence of who we are at our core. Our spiritual heart is our why. It is what Marcus Borg calls "the womb creation," it is where our creativity, compassion, hope, and justice lives until we breathe it into life. When we get too focused on all of the other things, instead of our why we risk damaging our spiritual heart. We put ourselves at risk for spiritual heart attack.

There I was, in the midst of a profound spiritual event. Instead of focusing on the core essence of myself, the things that called me to religious life, the thing that called me to Covenant, the things that brings me into partnership with God and gives me life. I found myself so focused on all the other stuff: the who and what, the when and the where, the how and the because that I had put myself at risk of spiritual death. I was having an Emmaus moment, where I could not see

Have you ever been so focused on the “stuff: the who, what, when, where, how, and because that you lost your purpose, lost your why? Are we as a faith community so focused, right now, on our emotions of fear, anger, anxiety, and apathy that we have forgot to see the face of Christ in the person sitting right next to us?

This might be our Emmaus moment and we, as a church, might be having a spiritual heart attack and feeling the pain and suffering that it brings. Today, as we take time to pray and meditate in the rest of the service, I invite you to take the opportunity to asses your spiritual health. I invite you to name your why and identify the places that are taking the focus away from the why. Use the diagram on the wonder sheet that is in your bulletin and fill in the arteries that might be blocked by the stuff in your life and preventing you from seeing Christ within and with each one of us.

At the second hospital, the medical team performed a cardiac intervention, placing a stent to restore the blood flow from Keith's Heart, but they could not undo the damage that had been done. His doctor told him he was lucky to be alive.

In the midst of our spiritual heart attack, God is calling us, like Jesus called those disciples on the Emmaus Road, to slow down, to be in holy conversations with other and to widen the circle larger and larger. God is inviting us to sit at the table with the people who we do not know and even with those who do not like and share the stories of our common humanity. God's intervention, is not a passive

suggestion; it is a call to action — call to ministry within the community — that promotes a way forward instead of secluding ourselves within the suffering and pain. Jesus' ministry was equipping everyone to encounter God's love in the midst of systems of exclusion and power. The gospel that Jesus promotes only widens the circle of inclusion and provides abundantly for everyone.

Now is the time to intervene and prevent the damage to the heart of this community. Our why is not about HOW big of an endowment we have; the building we occupy; the music we experience; and even the preaching we hear. The why does not exist in who is on staff or who is in leadership. Our why, the essence of this community is to be a tangible encounter for others with the radical message of God's unwavering love for all of humanity and the entirety of creation. We will (re)find our why when we come together in honest and loving relationships with one another and affirming each other's gifts instead of sabotaging their efforts. Restoring the heart of this community will require us to enter into hard and uncomfortable conversations with ourselves and one another. It will mean using the wisdom gained from our tradition to innovate into our future. It will ask us to boldly travel a path forward and not lock ourselves into our anxiety and pain. It will mean taking the risk of confronting old problems in new ways, with open eyes, hearts, and minds so that we can encounter Christ within each one of us. It will widen the circle so everyone is included and every voice is heard.

Returning home, probably like many others, Keith was facing a new normal. The day after getting out of the hospital he began walking. Not a long distance, just down the street and back, which completely wore him out. “This was going to be the new me.” Keith cried. Keith’s walks continued, a little further each time. Eventually, increasing them to three and then four miles — not quickly, but he did it, he did the work he needed to do to start a new life.

Each and every day we encounter God, not as a supernatural being removed from the universe, but as an ever-present spirit and source of wisdom along our journey. A guide that breaks into our lives no matter what we are focused on, no matter the depth of our despair and to restores us to a new and flourishing life.

God is here, living in the womb of our being, providing the steady and ever-present rhythm to our lives.

When we slow down when we pause from the chaos and noise, when we sit at the table, to break bread, and share the cup with our neighbors Christ, the God of compassion and justice is there sitting right next to us and revealing to us that God has been there the whole time. Holding us accountable for our actions, affirming our gifts, and helping us to dream the dreams we cannot dream ourselves; God has been there burning deep in our hearts. Amen