

“Seven Miles with a Stranger”
Luke 24:13-35
Sermon at Glennon Heights Mennonite Church
April 30, 2017
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Good morning! I send greetings from many communities around the Anabaptist world with whom we fellowship this morning. In my role with MCC, I am always amazed by the expansiveness of the relational networks that make up the Anabaptist world, whether that be family ties, or friendships that span continents. We—along with the wider ecumenical church—truly are part of a global body of people that share in a common life on this planet. And that sense of *commonness* is one of the things that continues provoke the peacebuilding work of MCC in various places around the world. Our work as MCC—and as a wider church—stems from a recognition that no matter who you are, or where you are from, we are all neighbors; and we all need one another to continue to live in a peaceful and just world.

Recently, yard signs with that message have sprung up around our neighborhood in South Minneapolis. They say in three languages, “no matter who you are or where you are from, we are all neighbors”—I imagine that these signs are in Denver as well. In a political and social world that continues to be fragmented by longstanding forms of injustice, prejudice, and violence; the simple call to “love your neighbor” seems more relevant, powerful, and *difficult* as ever.

It is no illusion, however, that the words “love your neighbor” are easy to say, but hard to practice. And sometimes, I think, we would do well to acknowledge ways that “loving our neighbor” isn’t as easy as bringing over a plate of cookies, or inviting them to the next community dinner (although, that sometimes helps!). To love one’s neighbor sometimes requires us to take the time to enter our neighbor’s story, and even, perhaps, to begin to learn their life and even their pain. And maybe, at times, to recognize the ways we may have not been the neighbors that we aspire to be.

Our story of the Emmaus road today is about resurrection and healing and the world-changing reality of a risen body of Jesus. It is also about a story of two disciples who, for at least a seven mile stroll, could only see the risen Christ as a *stranger*.

1 Story

An anniversary has been circling the news cycles this week that captured my attention as I was preparing this sermon. It was twenty-five years ago today that the National Guard converged on the city of Los Angeles after a second day of violent uprisings known to some as the 1992 LA Riots. As you may remember, the unrest was sparked by the acquittal of four police officers accused of excessive

force which was documented in the infamous videotape showing the gratuitous beating of Rodney King. Up until this time, there was scant video evidence of police brutality—there were no body cameras, folks didn't carry phones like they do now. Accusations of police brutality were largely based on the voices of African-American communities, which were often submerged among other perspectives.

The King video was perhaps the first nationally distributed viewable evidence of this police brutality, and it therefore garnered widespread attention to the realities of anti-black violence. The fact that even with the video evidence the four accused officers were acquitted on all accounts stirred anger and collective rage; and in a matter of hours, Los Angeles appeared to sink into all-out civil war in which images of open gun battles, beatings, and burnings of community-owned business and other institutions were nationally televised.

As if putting fuel on flames, the Los Angeles police chief at the time frequently spoke to the media, numerous times calling for peace and an end to the violence, while openly questioning why anyone would “willingly destroy their own communities in such a destructive way.” Such a statement reflected what many households across white America also seemed to be saying: “where is all this anger coming from?” “Have not things gotten better?” or “why destroy a neighborhood over a few bad apples?” So, broadly speaking, the King verdicts symbolized a deep

division among the experiences of white and black people across America. And once again, white Americans demonstrated that they could not *see* the violence and pain that African-American communities had expressed for decades.

There is some literature from peace-church/Anabaptist communities regarding the 1992 events in Los Angeles during this time in which one can see a parallel with the sentiment of mainstream white America. Some Anabaptist publications during this time focused on the danger of rioting and social disruption, noting particularly how violence begets more violence, and advocated for a peaceful and nonviolent resolution. Others suggested that limited police force was indeed necessary for preserving peace (although, Christians should not participate in the use of such force).¹ While others spotlighted the truly heroic efforts of certain individuals who moved *towards* the violence to save strangers whom they did not know, often at great risk to themselves.² And indeed, such heroic efforts should be highlighted as a true expression of neighborly love reflecting deep Anabaptist convictions.

But what statements of peace-church communities and the representative words of white Americans seemed to miss in their gaze on Los Angeles, was a deep recognition that the anger and the pain driving the riots resulted from the

¹ Andy Alexis-Baker, "The Gospel or a Glock: Mennonites and the Police," in *Conrad Grebel Review*, 25, no. 2 (Winter 2007).

² E.g., N. Gerald Shenk, *Hope Indeed: Remarkable Stories of Peacemakers* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2008), ch. 4.

enduring experience of violence from ongoing residential segregation, economic injustice, police brutality, and mass incarceration.³

Now with video evidence before us, would white Americans *see* and hear the claims African-American communities have been making all these years?

But a video can't cure blindness; and visual evidence can't convince someone who simply cannot, is unable, or is unwilling to see it for what it is. Such was the case in 1992, and so also may that be the case now. And in such a context, the anger emerging from Los Angeles during April of 1992, similar perhaps to anger from Ferguson, Baltimore, and Baton Rouge, extended not only from the failure of justice, it also emerged from the failure of the world to even *see* the evidence that lay right before our eyes. It is possible that we peace-loving Anabaptists, as Vincent Harding once said, simply "remain blind to the violence experienced by racially different people."

Such blindness, when read in the context of the Emmaus road story, seems to illuminate the story for me in a new way.

How can we live and practice the reality of resurrection when our blindness keeps us from seeing another's pain? How might seeing through resurrection eyes help us to see not only the risen body of Jesus; but maybe also resurrection eyes

³ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 6. Hartman uses the language of "the afterlife of slavery" here, I cannot seem to re-find where I have seen her language as the afterlife of Jim Crow.

help us to see more clearly the way that the world groans for healing and justice that resurrection brings?

2 Text

Seven miles. That's how long our text today says the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus was. A long walk for us to imagine doing regularly—perhaps not for someone living in the first-century. But, used to walking or not, seven miles gives a long of time for friends and strangers to talk.

Our story begins in verse 13 with two of Jesus' disciples wandering that road between Jerusalem and Emmaus in the immediate days after the death of Jesus. I imagine that those days were similar to the unique time after a major crisis or change, one that seems to profoundly shake the sure foundations of the world. Rumors and rumors about rumors abound, mixed with hope, fear, and confusion (v. 18-19).

Amidst the rumors swirling around these two disciples as they begin on the road was one dangerous rumor in particular: that Jesus who had died on the cross as "King of the Jews" just a few days ago had been raised from the dead, and now is alive.

Preposterous? *Probably*. Likely? *Probably not*. But something peculiar seemed to have happened to his body, because the women disciples who had gone

to the tomb yesterday said that *it was gone*. They said that as they stood there, they themselves had heard a messenger from the Lord proclaim that he is indeed *alive*. Again, preposterous? *Probably*. Likely? *Probably not*. And yet, the other disciples—had gone to see. And the tomb was *indeed* empty. That much is certain. But resurrection?

In short time, verse 15 says that our two disciples were confronted by someone on the road who appeared to be a stranger. But we know that he is actually the risen Jesus in bodily form. Our traveling disciples, however, they cannot see the world-altering figure that stands before their eyes. They are themselves lost in confusion, anxiety, and maybe fear, unable to *see* beyond their broken doubts and aspirations for their hoped-for but now ostensibly dead King. They were blind to the reality of resurrection.

Recognizing their failure to see rightly, the stranger-Jesus accompanied the disciples on the road, explaining to them—step-by-step—that the cross was not the end, and that the reality of Israel’s King was embodied in the person that stands before them.

The disciples still could not see. Despite the evidence before them, the irrefutable bodily presence of *King Jesus himself*, they *still* could not see the reality of resurrection.

But, as verse 32 later describes, these disciples felt something burning within. Perhaps they could not see or understand that the risen Christ was present with them at that very moment, but they could feel a sense of urgency or unease—there was something there to which their eyes were not adequately adjusted. Something isn't way that they were seeing it to be, and they felt tension and even conflict; as if they themselves knew something that they could not see.

Seven miles in, they get to the end of the road. They had shared in a journey with this stranger, and now a literal crossroad stands before them. Do they go on in their blindness, or do they come to see the risen Christ before them?

Verse 29 tells us that the burning within moves these two unseeing disciples to invite the stranger in—to stay with them, to eat, and to share in the fellowship of the table. It is only then, long after the risen stranger-Christ confronted them, long after he shared with them the seven mile trip on the Emmaus road, long after that stranger-Christ step-by-step showed these disciples how it was possible that the unthinkable was true, in the breaking of bread, and hospitality at the table, the disciples *finally* had their blindness healed: they saw the risen Christ before them. By the prevailing presence of the stranger-Christ, they *saw* the risen Christ, and the world-now-changed.

Now, we traditionally understand *resurrection* as a moment of radical hope and healing, as a time to rejoice and rest in the reality that God has won: death no longer claims power in this world; that world-as-we-know-it has forever changed. Resurrection eyes help us to see the world within the story of God's upside-down kingdom in which the power of evil has been defeated, the principalities defused, and violence, racism, and oppression no longer hold their sway. Jesus who was put to death has been raised, and the world overcome. This is all true.

But there is another aspect to resurrection eyes, however, that I don't think we often consider when we think of the Emmaus road and the appearance of the risen Christ. That is, that resurrection eyes do not only help us to see the hope and joy of Christ's resurrected body; they also help us to see more clearly the ways that the world groans for healing. And more, resurrection eyes provide us a means for beginning to see how we ourselves are in need of healing from our collusion with the principalities of oppression, and even death.

What this means is that the story of the Emmaus road is both a story about the glorious reality of the resurrection—the once dead and now alive body of Jesus; and it is a story about how resistant our vision is to understanding and even *seeing* the world through that gaze of resurrection. It is a story about how deeply we need the stranger in Christ, and also, how deeply we need Christ in the stranger. We need that stranger Christ and Christ stranger to walk with us on the journey, to

show us the way, to share with us in fellowship, and in friendship, in order for *us* to also be *set free*.

4

For many years, MCC has been involved in the work of anti-racism, specially in domestic programs, where we focus on anti-racism and de-colonializing programs among our staff and constituency. One of the programs that has emerged from that emphasis, a program no longer officially with MCC, but is closely related, is the Damascus Road anti-racism training (some of you might have even participated in one of these trainings). That training, drawing on the imagery of Paul's conversion upon meeting Jesus on the *Damascus* road, immerses program participants in the very difficult struggle of coming to *see* the ways that racism is embedded in all of us—in our practices, in our communities, and in our vision. The idea is that racism is actually a form of blindness that prevents us from seeing the ways that we are complicit in racial injustice. Like scales falling from Paul's eyes, the Damascus road program has sought to be a moment in which people—specifically white people—come to see our need to be changed.

Upon reading the Emmaus road story, however, I wonder this other road trip story—as opposed to Paul's Damascus road experience—is a better or another image for understanding the work that lies before us. Perhaps we as MCC and as a

wider church need to think about overcoming our complicity with racism and violence not as a moment on the Damascus Road—like scales falling from our eyes—but instead as an Emmaus Road journey, one that is characterized by an ongoing struggle to see the world with resurrection eyes even in the midst of our perpetual blindness. Perhaps it may be that the work that we have before us requires that we share a longer road with the stranger in Christ and Christ in the stranger, through whom we learn to open our lives to a risen Jesus and a world of resurrection from which we ourselves, and our own sight, might be healed.

One of the ways we at MCC are entering this journey is by seeking relationships and partnerships with people who intimately know and understand the groaning of the world and can envision the work of justice and peace firsthand—the work of resurrection. On our most recent learning tour in New Orleans, for instance, 19 of us (including your pastor Betsy), embarked on a journey in which our lives and ways of seeing were confronted by strangers who helped us to see the ways that racism shapes our country’s criminal justice system through segregation, police brutality, and ongoing racial disparities in mass incarceration. For many of us—myself included—that journey was a figurative Emmaus road, in which Christ in the stranger showed us how to see the groaning of the world, and thereby, the hope of the world to come. I hope that in the future

you all may consider joining us sometime as we together walk another Emmaus road, open to the ways that the stranger Christ may teach us to see.

Stranger in Christ, and Christ in the stranger, may you heal us from our blindness and teach us to see the world through the eyes of resurrection. Amen.

Benediction

Stranger in Christ, and Christ in the stranger;

Heal us from our blindness, and teach us to see the world through
the eyes of your resurrection.

Amen.