

The Road to Our Emmaus

Seven miles really isn't very far. Think Hillside to Ridge Rd., or Kellogg to 54th St North. On the highway you can drive it in 7 minutes, and that's only going sixty. If you're going faster than that, or if you're not paying attention, seven miles can pass before you even know it. Like life itself, wouldn't you say?

But what if you're not driving? What if you're walking? Then seven miles is a big deal. Walking that would take the better part of a day, if you figure in rest stops and water breaks. And what if the road is rocky and winding? What if it is in the mountains, or in the desert? Some of us wouldn't even make it. We'd give out after maybe one mile, or two, tops. And we'd find ourselves in the middle of nowhere.

Like life itself, seven miles is plenty far enough to get yourselves into serious trouble. To take a wrong turn. Stumble and fall. To get lost. Or injured. Or dehydrated. Or robbed.

But it's also far enough, if you're fortunate, to have a really profound conversation. To process some of life's experiences. To talk, and listen, spend time in silence. Think how much ground you could cover. Think how deep you could go.

Cleopas and the other, unnamed disciple had a lot to talk about, and plenty to process. They needed this journey. The one that they were sure was "the one," the Messiah/Savior foretold by the prophets, had instead turned out to be nothing but a phony. In Greek, *hypocrites*, which translated means "hypocrite." A pretender.

What if you have invested all your time and energy and maybe even money in a project or person you were convinced was really, really important only to find out it was nothing but a hoax, only to see it go up in smoke, or in Cleopas' case get nailed to a cross? You'd be pretty devastated, despondent, lost.

Granted, talking about it with a close friend helps. As we all know, misery loves company. It just doesn't change anything. The misery is still there.

And then, what if a total stranger suddenly appears, and begins walking and talking with you. You didn't invite him. He just inserts himself into the conversation. He acts like he knows what he is talking about. But how can he? He doesn't know what you're going through. He doesn't know about your shattered dreams and lost hopes. He should mind his own business.

Don't you hate people like that? People who think they know how you're feeling, and act as if they have the answers, or at least some insights you might not have thought of? What makes us so suspicious of strangers who just barge their way into our otherwise private, personal conversations? Is it their lack of social etiquette? Our sense of propriety? Is it our pride? Like our not wanting to be condescended to, disagreed with, challenged, made to feel that we are somehow short-sighted, or ignorant, or worst of all, wrong?

For that matter, what is it that makes us suspicious of people, period? I think it's fear—fear that we will be taken advantage of or harmed in some way. And standing just behind fear, there is ignorance. Fear of what we don't know, or understand. Think of how many great conversations that keeps us from having! Or how many great insights that keeps us from hearing.

But every once in a while, we're just daring enough to take a risk, just courageousness enough to take a chance, just open enough or humble enough or secure enough to listen to someone else's viewpoint. Like Cleopas and his fellow disciple did with the stranger who barged his way into their world. They spent the rest of the day talking with him, and the rest of the journey walking with him. They even went out on a larger limb, and invited him to share a meal, and to stay for the night. And look who he ended up being!

I wonder how often we miss Jesus when he is right in front of us. And we either ignore him, or feel annoyed or threatened by him, or we walk evasively by on the other side, so that our precious thoughts or timetable don't get interrupted. And if we do deign to go ahead and speak to this stranger, we keep our guard up the whole time. So that we're actually relieved when he or she takes their leave. Think of the travesty—we were glad to see him or her go, and it ended up being Jesus! The very one in whom we had placed all our hopes, and then seen—or think we had seen—him die.

Think of the travesty. Two weeks ago today we celebrated Easter, the Resurrection of Jesus, and we're still no more prepared to meet him than if we'd never heard of Easter or the empty tomb.

This past Thursday here at the church we celebrated the life and death and home-going of Amanda Bartel. She lived a long life—92 years—and journeyed a long way. Long enough, I suspect, to have met Jesus many times.

As they say, hindsight is 20/20. And sometimes we just want to kick ourselves, and exclaim how foolish we were! If only we had known! We could have listened more carefully, and asked him more questions. On the other hand, hindsight is better than no sight. And I'd far rather look back and be able to recognize the times when I did meet Jesus, than to look back and see no such times at all.

By the end of today's story, the two disciples are renewed, encouraged, dare we say giddy with the good news. So much so that they decide, that very evening, to make the return trip back to Jerusalem. Another seven miles. Can they make it? I bet they can. They have each other. And, they now have even more to talk about. Broken bread. Burning hearts. Laughing at laughing at their own foolishness of mind, and slowness of heart.

This life we've been given is a journey. Our Emmaus road may be seven miles, or twenty-seven miles, or point seven miles. We may live to be 92, or a number far less. So why wait, and risk missing him altogether? Let's welcome the stranger. Let's practice hospitality. Let's gather together regularly. Let's have profound conversation. Let's share the Lord's Supper with one another. Who knows, we may be conversing or breaking bread with Jesus himself.

Because of Easter this much we know: Jesus will show up. We may not recognize him at the time. But like Amanda Bartel, one day, sooner or later, we'll know. And in the meantime it would be safest to simply assume he's already here.

Amen.