

HEARTBURN

Luke 24:13-35

The story is told about a boy who was four years old when his parents had another baby. The parents were concerned about how their 4 year-old would react to the newborn baby. Was he going to be jealous, angry, loving, or excited? They tried to watch the baby all the time and make sure that the adjustment period was safe. After a couple of weeks, things seemed to be getting normal when one evening after the baby went to sleep early, the 4 year-old disappeared from their sight and there was no noise in the house. The parents ran upstairs to check on the baby, when they opened the door to his room, they saw their 4 year-old son sitting in the crib with the newborn baby staring at the baby's face. When they asked him what he was doing, he said, *"I was asking my brother to tell me about God because I am beginning to forget."*

This is a story about how as human beings we grow up to act and feel so separate from God, separate from others and even separate from ourselves. We are born into this world with innate knowledge and experience of God's presence in and around us. A baby is born with an innate sense of connection to the parents. It takes human babies a few months before they realize that they are separate from their mothers. This physical separation leads us to feel spiritually separate. So, somewhere along the way, we start feeling separate even from those who love us and care for us. In the West, we put a lot of value on teaching our children to become independent and self-sufficient. But as we do that we often also infuse a sense of separation and disconnection from others which is only an illusion. Look at our houses and fences and how much we value our privacy. Parker Palmer, the Quaker educator, says that we have been trained in disconnection and taught to distance ourselves in an objectivist mode from nature, from God, and from our own souls. They become abstract artifacts. Leaders are schooled in disconnection -- objectifying, defining, describing, and disconnecting.

Retired seminary professor Hilmer Krause once described one of the high points of his days as a chaplain in the U.S. Navy. While on active duty in Europe, he was given an opportunity to join a delegation that would meet with the then Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Given a chance to ask questions of the Greek Orthodox leader, Dr. Krause asked how the Orthodox described the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist/communion. The patriarch replied that he didn't understand the question. Two more times Dr. Krause asked his question using slightly different words. Only after the third time did the patriarch's eyes brighten with understanding. His response was something like: *"Ah, now I see what you are asking. Isn't that just like you Westerners? You want to define everything while we simply stand in awe of the mystery."* But in the midst of all of our illusion of defining everything as if it is outside of ourselves and being separate from God and from others, we have a deep longing to connect. Our hearts know the truth about being connected to God and others. Our Bible story today is about two people whose hearts experienced that deep connection before their minds knew that truth.

The two disciples of Jesus we read about today left Jerusalem after the crucifixion of Jesus. They were in despair. Their political and religious hopes were crushed by the death of Jesus. He was supposed to liberate Israel from its occupiers, but he got killed. Despair was the mood of the day! They had no reason for staying in Jerusalem any more. They wanted to run away. They were in the heart of all of their illusions of separation from God, from others and from any hope. Then Jesus himself appears to them. They witnessed the events in Jerusalem but didn't really understand them. So, Jesus walks and talks with them to help them understand what happened but they don't recognize him. This is a puzzling piece for many biblical scholars. If the disciples knew Jesus, how could they not have recognized him? We can get stuck trying to explain the details of the story or why and how this could have happened or not even happened, but the message here for us is about something deeper.

Cleopas and his walking companion had been with Jesus for maybe hours before they knew who he was. Even at a good walking clip, and allowing for some brief breaks, a journey of seven miles will take a good three hours. We are told that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Yet, while their eyes and minds didn't recognize Jesus, their hearts knew him. But they didn't listen to their hearts. Their pain was too fresh and too strong for them to listen to their hearts. Many of us can identify with this experience of having known or felt something in our hearts, but only to dismiss it because it was not logical or because our feelings of separation or pain were too powerful. They didn't recognize him until they shared the meal together.

How our hearts feel is not something most of us are trained to pay attention to. Many people, especially women, confuse having heartburn with having a heart attack or vice versa. We are told to pay attention if we have any heart pain or even heartburn, because it could be a heart attack. We are given a list of symptoms to help us distinguish between heartburn and a heart attack. But even those symptoms can be confusing to us. I think a greater confusion happens when the source of our burning hearts is the Spirit's presence. When our hearts burn within us with the experience of God's presence, do we know how it feels and do we know how to pay attention? Do you know the symptoms? Do we become so familiar with God's presence in our lives that we are connected to it all the time? According to Jewish tradition, the heart is the throne of God's glory, which is the place where the *shekhinah*, the presence of God, most deeply is to be found. When the two disciples talk about their hearts burning within them, they are sharing their experience of God's presence within. The effect of the heart's becoming the home of God's glory is wonderfully described by St. Isaac of Nineveh. Writing in the seventh century, he describes what happens when the heart is open to God's presence and God's mystery. It becomes compassionate. It becomes merciful. What is a merciful heart, St. Isaac asks? *"It is a heart that burns with love for the whole of creation, for humankind, for the birds, for the beasts, for the demons: for every creature. When a person with such a heart as this thinks of the creatures or looks at them, his/her eyes are filled with tears. An overwhelming compassion makes his/her heart grow small and weak, and s/he cannot endure to hear or see any suffering, even the smallest pain inflicted upon any creature. S/he never ceases to pray with tears -- even for the irrational animals, the enemies of truth, and those who do him/her evil -- asking that they may be guarded and receive God's mercy. For the reptiles s/he also prays with a great compassion that rises up endlessly in his/her heart until s/he shines again and is glorious like God."*

The experience of Emmaus is not something that happened only in the past. It is something that happens today. The exact location for the town is not known. Pilgrims to modern day Israel and Palestine are shocked to learn that as many as six sites are identified as "Emmaus." I think this could be symbolic for us today that the historical location of Emmaus is not important because the spiritual importance of that experience is not limited to any one place or one time. Emmaus may be anywhere. Hearts burning and eyes opening do not take place in only one place. Emmaus comes into sight wherever a path leads us toward communion with God and whenever we recognize the risen Christ among us. Fredrick Buechner once wrote, "We experience God in three ways: as something beyond; something among; something within." This does not require supernatural stuff. This happens in our ordinary life of walking, talking and eating.

Here is a personal transformation experience of communion where my heart burnt within me when I was least expecting it. This was in Barrow, Alaska a few years ago. This was during the season of spring whaling. After the Inupiat/natives harvested a whale, they would have a community meal and celebration called Nalukatak. We were invited to be part of this amazing experience. After months of preparation, hard and dangerous work, the whaling captain and his family would share their gifts with others. We sat for about 4 hours being served one course after another of different parts of the whale: Blubber, meat, flipper, tongue, etc. Strangers and friends alike, poor and rich, all sat in the circle and received not only enough food to eat but also to take home. At first, I didn't understand why people would spend their money, time and energy to get a whale and then only to turn around and share it with others. The making of the boat, the preparation, the many nights the crew would spend on the ice endangering their lives, the hard work of bringing the whale to town, and all the expenses and time away from work, just didn't add up in my mind, especially in our modern day world. This might have made sense 100 years ago but not now! But that afternoon as I was complaining to Mike about the cold and having to sit there and pretend to be eating all these different parts of the whale, it suddenly hit me. This is the same spirit of communion: A free gift, where love and labor are shared generously so that people may feel cared for and loved. Nalukatak was about this open table of grace where all are welcomed, even strangers, including us White people who don't even understand and fully appreciate the gift! Nalukatak was about sharing the gifts of God without hoarding and greed. Despite the cold, my heart was burning within me because I experienced God's presence through this meal of unconditional love.

Christ was made known to the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the breaking of the bread! God is made known to us whenever and wherever love is shared. Today we are breaking bread together to celebrate the presence of Christ among us. May our eyes be opened as our hearts burn within us to recognize and receive the presence of Christ in and among us.