

Living and walking on the road

Luke 24:13-35

The Rev. Sara Fischer

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

There's a book called "If you meet George Herbert on the road, kill him." The book calls for radically re-thinking the priestly ministry of the Church and, by association, the work of the whole church. George Herbert was a beautiful poet—born in 1593, in Wales—whose work has been set to music over the centuries and can be found throughout our hymnal. He was not actually a priest very long, but set a standard for priesthood that has been elevated and romanticized and been the dominant model for many priests and for their congregations over the centuries. He ministered in a small church, in a small town, and gave his whole life to the church, while continuing to write poetry that reflected a rich and deeply contemplative, sacramental prayer life. When people in the church needed clothing or food, he brought it to them. When people couldn't come to church, he brought them the sacrament. When the church did not have money to pay him, he put his own money into the church.

The book is provocatively named and the title inspired by an earlier popular work called "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him" which was published in 1976. The George Herbert-titled book was written in the 2009, during one of our church's many seasons of self-diagnosis and reinvention. (I think may we're still in that season. Maybe we've always been.) The book's claim is that Herbert set an impossible bar for parish life.

The same could be said, of course, about Jesus, upon whom Herbert strived to model his life and work.

What does today's gospel, about another meeting on the road, have to say to us about what it means to be church—gathered Christians tasked with unveiling the Kingdom of God in our context—four hundred years after George Herbert and two thousand years after the disciples' encounter with Jesus? What does today's gospel have to say to a church in a season of discernment and self-evaluation, that is, in a search process?

We could imagine that today's gospel is a parable of church, but I'd rather imagine that it's a parable of the Kingdom of God. Let's see where that takes us.

The disciples are on the move. They aren't sitting and waiting for something to happen, they are on the road, traveling from Jerusalem. We don't know why they're going to Emmaus. Perhaps it's their hometown. Perhaps it's a way-station to somewhere else. Perhaps they've given up on Jerusalem and all the things Jesus promised them and they're going home. Or perhaps they're looking for something and they haven't figured out what it is. All we know is that they're on the move. Kind of like a church actively searching for a new priest.

They talk with each other about everything that has happened. Some things they saw, some things they only heard about. They are pondering and puzzling over the events of the past few days, piecing together what they

heard from Jesus before he died, what they heard from the prophets before that, what they heard from some women about an empty tomb. Pieces of the story make sense, but most of it doesn't. They talk together, contemplating mystery to see where they fit. They are sharing their deepest questions of faith. That's an important part of community life, especially during a search process.

A stranger appears, and they welcome the stranger into the conversation. That, too, is an important part of life during an interim period. They are not afraid to share their truth. Or they are afraid and they do it anyway. They tell him all about Jesus, and they share their wondering. They are open to his story. I try to put myself in their position, hearing this person who looks like a stranger say "Oh, how foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" They listen. The stranger is welcome to come late to the story and to add his piece.

So perhaps the kingdom of God is a place where people are on the move, and in their travels they talk with one another and share their doubts and their faith, and they let others into the conversation, into the story, even when the others seem to know a whole lot more—or less—than they do. The Kingdom of God is soft and porous around the edges.

When the two disciples on the road get to their destination, instead of bidding the stranger farewell, they invite him to stay with them. They practice the gospel hospitality that they had probably learned from Jesus, and the rest, as we know, is history.

Anyone here a theater or classics major? May you already know the word *anagnorisis*. It refers to the moment, in drama, when recognition happens. According to Aristotle, the very best kind of anagnorisis was when the moment of recognition is conveyed through a character's actions, without any words. Aristotle would have been very pleased with today's gospel.

Jesus never says "Aha! I am the one to redeem Israel!" In fact, he says nothing. He vanishes. His work there in that place and time is done. The fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing bread is symbolic of Jesus' whole life and mission, and tells the disciples everything they need to know.

I can think of no better way to describe the life of discipleship, than what my mentor and friend Ken Leech used to call "Eucharistic Living." By this I mean making the Kingdom real through our own fourfold action, in our lives in the world, of taking the abundance God has given us, giving thanks, breaking it open or ourselves being broken, and sharing of God's abundance and our own humanity. This is what you all have to offer the world. This is our life and mission as Christians. And I venture to say it's not all that far off from George Herbert.