

Luke 24:13-35

Walking was once the main form of transportation, and in the villages I visited while on a mission trip in the African country of Zimbabwe, it still is. Very few people in these villages own a bicycle and almost no one owns a car. There was one particular village where we spent a few days with the people of the village, commuting in a rented passenger van from our hotel to the village. The pastor there was most excited that he had recently been gifted a bicycle to travel his 30 mile circuit to his churches. Before this his only means of transportation was to walk. It was in this village I had the opportunity to preach on Sunday morning.

Even though English is an official language in Zimbabwe, many of the village people only spoke Shona, so I needed an interpreter. He and I spent about an hour talking together for him to learn my speech patterns and intonations, making it easier for him to interpret on Sunday morning. While we were talking the rest of the group went to visit the homes of the villagers. The interpreter and I stayed behind and as we spoke, we were observed by a group of village women. After he felt comfortable enough with my speaking patterns, we went looking for my traveling companions. Of course we couldn't make the walk alone, so we asked if any of the women would like to walk with us. The two who accompanied us were schoolteachers.

Even though walking a treadmill and walking on the dirt African roads are quite different it was a wonderful walk. We talked about our cultural differences, mostly about food. They couldn't believe we put fruit in between pie crust; they only had meat pies. They don't eat bread, their main form of starch is from corn, or as they called it, maize. The maize is ground to different textures for different uses. They were surprised to hear about popcorn. There was one staple food I really enjoyed, sadza, it was served at every meal. It is made from ground corn, the closest of our food I can relate it to is grits, but it is not the same. My new friends even took me to a grinding mill so I could see the different grinds of maize. This walk with strangers who became friends was the highlight of my African village visits. A true walk to remember.

In today's gospel Jesus meets up with two of his followers who have given up their dream and are returning home. They didn't recognize Jesus for who he is when he joins them; perhaps because they never expected to have someone who had died join them on the road. Perhaps because they are blocked from recognizing him. As they walk Jesus explains all the Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled by his time on earth. Cleopas and his companion never felt ill at ease as the stranger joined them. There are seldom times today when we walk that strangers join us. Most people have a fear of strangers because we don't know who to trust. Yet we welcome people into our church community and make an effort to have them feel welcome. We practice philoxenia, love of the stranger, every time we reach out to someone who is new, just like the African villagers were eager to learn and share with me on our long walk.

Fortunately the two on the road to Emmaus also practiced philoxenia. Darkness was almost upon them as they reached their home. It was not safe to be walking alone in the night, and even though Jesus seems to be continuing his walk, they urge him to stay with them. Jesus, who was the stranger, is now the guest. They welcome him, and include him at their table. They took care of Jesus the way Jesus wants us to take care of people. He challenges us to feed the hungry and welcome the outcast. We, the church, the hands and feet of Jesus in the world, are called to show hospitality in the name of Jesus whether it is by feeding the hungry through a food pantry or by welcoming the guest to our worship service. Guests are important to Jesus, which is why

he played that role on the road to Emmaus. He wanted to challenge his followers to see him as a guest and take good care of him.

Matthew 25:34-35 tells us, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me." It goes on to tell how the hearers of his words were confused because they never remembered welcoming him. Jesus tells them "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it to me."

Jesus still comes to us as a guest. When we help a person in need, we're really helping Jesus. And this happens not only in church, but on the street, in school and in the workplace. This can be tough to do at times because of the competitive nature in our world today, with everyone forced to do more with less. But the truth is, when you help a person in need, you're helping Jesus.

Back to the road to Emmaus. Jesus, the stranger, become a guest as he accepted their invitation to stay but he quickly changed roles. When he's sitting at the table with them he became their host. He took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him—and he vanished from their sight. They welcomed a stranger and in doing so they welcomed the Lord. We too are nourished through the host when we celebrate Holy Communion. As the bread is broken, we're invited to open our hearts to the presence of Christ. He's come to feed us, and to fill us with his power and his presence.

It's important for us to allow Jesus to be our host; to eat his bread, drink his cup and allow his body and blood to become part of our body and blood; to accept the forgiveness he offers and to allow ourselves to be strengthened and inspired. Sometimes, it's easier for us to help others than to receive help. At times we would rather be a host than let someone else be a host. But, at the Lord's Supper, permit Jesus to be your host. Open yourself to what he wants to give you.

The passage ends with the two disciples racing back to Jerusalem to share the news of their experience with the other disciples. They told them what happened on the road, and how Jesus "had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (v. 35).

The church, like the Emmaus story, is where Jesus meets his disciples as a stranger, as a guest and as a host. It is where we learn how to welcome one another around a table, and then go out into the world with a proclamation that Jesus meets us as stranger, guest, and host. It is where we come together and strengthen our bonds with Jesus and with each other. When we practice Christian hospitality, we become part of a mighty spiritual movement -- one that can overcome divisions in a terribly polarized world. It all begins when Jesus breaks the bread, our eyes are opened, and we recognize him.

All glory be to God