

Discussions along the Way

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Luke 24:13-35

I love a good road trip. There's something about a long road trip that seems extra special – in a way that flying never can be. It's not just that you can be more flexible with how much luggage you take, although it is that. It's not just that you avoid the vagaries of airline delays, although it's that as well. It's not just that you are more in control of your schedule. It's not just that you can avoid long lines at airport security, for it's all that, too.

It's that with a road trip, you have a much more visceral sense of the distance you travel, of the ground you cover, of the landscape changes along the way. There's so much to see, so much to observe. It's not just about the destination; it's about every sight, sound, and smell you experience enroute. It's like the difference between microwaving a heat & serve meal and cooking from scratch with fresh produce you just picked from the garden.

What makes it even better is when you travel with someone. A road trip by yourself is nice, but a road trip with a good traveling companion – that ranks right up there among the best of simple pleasures. When you comment on that really obnoxious billboard you just passed, you have someone to listen to you. When you reach the top of the hill to discover the scenic valley below, you have someone to appreciate it with you. When you're going around the traffic circle for the tenth time, you have someone there to help make sure you finally take the correct turn-off.

And besides, the time flies with the right travel companion – like when I took a road trip to Baltimore with a colleague from our Presbytery, to go visit a mission site for ideas. Now, before the trip, I knew her. We'd had lunch together a few times. We'd certainly been in meetings together. I had every expectation that we'd get along just fine. And when it came down to it, it was better than fine. In fact, we talked nonstop the entire trip down, and the entire trip back. And we covered the gamut – from essential plans and nitty gritty details to big ideas about things that deeply matter.

That's what I love best about those long trips with a good travel partner - the substantial time you spend together allows for some of the best conversations to happen. Because when you spend enough time with someone on the journey, you eventually move past light banter and good-natured chit chat, to conversations about things that really matter – things of depth and meaning, your hopes and fears, the things you wonder about, the things you struggle with, and if you dare – things of faith, even if you don't use religious words.

Conversation matters. That we talk matters. What we talk about matters. And how we talk about it matters.

I spent much of this past week with eight other clergy, along with two facilitators, beginning a two-year journey of learning together and deepening our leadership practices. We were all strangers when we started. From the very start, our facilitators laid out some very clear expectations. And chief among them was that we be willing to be fully present in every conversation, and that to a person we open ourselves to express our vulnerabilities with one another. They said the only way we'd have the experience we needed to have was if every single one of us honored that parameter, and held that sacred space for it to happen.

Great. Who wants to be vulnerable in front of eight strangers?! Who wants to share those tender thoughts? My heart started pounding a bit faster; in fact, just thinking about it even now raises my pulse rate just a bit. Even for clergy that can feel a bit risky; it leaves you feeling exposed.

Now, I will 'fess up that I was not the first among us to take that step. Someone else had the courage to risk the deeper conversation, and open a grace-filled invitation for the rest of us to follow suit.

And do you know what? Somewhere along the way, somewhere in those conversations about things of faith and struggle, of hopes and fears, of confusion and wonder, Jesus showed up.

According to Luke, two disciples were on a journey, too, from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They had heard the report of the women who'd seen the empty tomb, but they considered it an 'idle tale' – not to be believed. To walk seven miles isn't forever, but it's long enough to get a substantive conversation going. Apparently, they had no shortage of things to talk about, for they had shared the same grief-filled experience around Jesus' death. They'd hoped he'd be the one to redeem their people, but they hadn't seen him. It's a long trip between Jerusalem and Emmaus, writes Karoline Lewis, "because the distance between "we had hoped" and "the Lord is risen indeed" seems like forever, the longest trip ever."

I can't imagine how difficult it would have been for either Cleopas or his unnamed travel companion to have walked that road alone. Their disappointment was profound. Their hope had withered. Their sadness cast a dark shadow. As they made the journey to Emmaus, they talked and they discussed, and they talked and they discussed some more as they tried to make sense of what had happened. What did it mean for them? What would it mean for them in the future?

And then, somewhere in their conversation about their hopes and fears and faith and confusion, the risen Christ showed up. They did not recognize him on the road; they didn't recognize him until later when he broke bread with them. Nevertheless, he stayed with them, to walk and talk with them, to interpret the Scriptures to them, to engage their broken hearts and talk about what really matters.

Karoline Lewis says he didn't just join them on the way; he got them to articulate what they experienced. "What are these things that have taken place?" Jesus asked.

Using words from Psalm 116, Lewis says: "The road to Emmaus shows us that when the snares of death encompass us; when the pangs of Sheol lay hold on us; when we suffer distress and anguish, the Lord will indeed save our lives (Psalm 116:3-4), by walking the road with us, yes, but also, by asking us "what things?" which means that then the road might actually get us somewhere. And that somewhere, eventually, is the place where we recognize and start to live out the life-changing presence of the resurrected Christ."

Henri Nouwen wrote that "it is one of the characteristics of our contemporary society that encounters [with people], good as they may be, don't become deep relationships. Thus our life is filled with good advice, helpful ideas, wonderful perspectives, but they are simply added to the many other ideas and perspectives and so leave us 'uncommitted.'" In a society with such an informational overload, even the most significant encounters can be reduced to 'something interesting' among many other interesting things." I noted that the copyright on that quote was 1994 – 23 years ago. How much more true might it be today?

Among the many things that are happening today, one of them is the reception into membership of the commissioning class. These eight young people have completed one leg of their faith journeys. They've walked the road together, talking and sharing and questioning. I have a strong suspicion that somewhere along the way, not only Jane showed up, but Jesus showed up as well.

It is not the end of their faith journey; it's only the beginning; there are miles and miles and many more legs to go. In fact, not a single person in this sanctuary, young or old, is done with theirs.

Did you notice that of the two disciples on the road, only one is named? Only Cleopas is named; the other isn't. It's a curious detail, don't you think? Mark Douglas posits that leaving the second

disciple unnamed could be Luke's subtle rhetorical way of inviting us into the plot and thereby catching us up in the power of the story. "Had both disciples been named, we readers would be observers more than potential participants in the story."

That's us. We are all on that road to Emmaus. We are all the disciples that Cynthia Jarvis says are called to travel on the journey "from knowledge to encounter, from information to transformation...from fear to trust, from doubt to joy, from disbelief to power, from grief to witness."

The road is designed to be walked with companions, with fellow travelers. So who will be your travel companions? Who will you invite along? And what will you talk about?

I can tell you that I'm looking at a sanctuary full of great travel companions. Take a moment. Look around. Catch the eye of your neighbor. These are your travel companions – right here – every Sunday morning, in worship, and in ministry throughout the week. Walk the road *with* one another. Actively. Regularly. Let's get out our faith Fitbits, and start counting those steps as we begin the next leg of the trip. Together.

And invite travel companions that you can talk with about things that matter – your own hopes and fears, and God's hope for you. Maybe you'll invite someone older than you – someone who's been around the block a few more times, someone who has the wisdom of lived experience to share with you. Or maybe you'll invite someone younger than you – someone with fresh questions and new perspectives to share with you. Invite someone who's different than you, and let them show you what you've been unable to see. Maybe there's a group of travelers you'd like to join up with – travelers who are making meals along the way, or studying the Scriptures together, or helping others as they go along, or working for God's vision of justice and peace.

Find them. And cultivate your conversations along the way. Oh, the possibilities! In my office I have a set of Faith Talk cards to use with children. Among those cards, there are some great discussion questions - here are some of my favorites: "If Jesus were visiting your house, what game would you like to play with him?" "How do you think God felt when Jesus was born?" "Pretend you're God and you just finished creating the world. What's the favorite thing you made?" "What do you wish God hadn't made?" "What does it mean when someone says, 'I forgive you?'" "What does it mean to love someone?"

Talk about your questions. Talk about how you see God. Talk about what you'd like to ask God if you had a direct line. Talk about your struggles. Talk about what you've learned. And about what you don't understand. Talk about a time you felt close to God. And about a time God felt far away. Talk about what you thank God for. And about where you've been disappointed. And even talk about what breaks your heart.

And I believe with all my heart when you do, Jesus will show up, whether or not you recognize him.

To be human is to be broken, David Lose reiterates. "And it is to [his] heartbroken disciples... that the Risen Christ comes, walking along with us on the road, astonished that we don't see as we ought, teaching us the Scriptures that we may understand, sharing his presence through bread and wine, and granting burning hearts that prompt us back into the world."

So I ask again: Who will be your travel companions on your road of faith? Who will you invite along? What will you talk about? And what might it be like when you realize who has just shown up?

Amen.