

## **April 30, 2017 – Recognizing Christ**

### **Luke 24: 13-35**

At our Church Council meeting on Thursday night we had a discussion about the safety of staff and volunteers who may be working alone in one of the corners of this vast building. There was concern expressed about the possibility of someone just walking off the street - someone who might be intoxicated, or mentally ill or angry at the world – someone who could be dangerous. As I thought about that conversation over the past couple of days I realized just how programmed we are to be fearful of strangers.

I'm not suggesting that fear is the wrong response. There are lots of reasons to be fearful. In this world, and even our own city, there are people who are sick or angry or confused enough to strike out and cause physical harm. But I also realize that some of my most positive and memorable encounters have been with strangers: people I have met while travelling, people I have met on the street, people who have walked off the street and into my office. Life is a journey and it is a journey that is full of encounters with strangers.

Today's scripture reading is the story of just such an encounter. It's the first Easter Sunday, the day of the resurrection and two of Jesus' lesser known disciples are walking along the road heading toward a village called Emmaus. As they walk they try to make sense of the events of the past week – a week filled with expectation, joy, disillusionment, betrayal, guilt and grief.

As they are walking along a stranger approaches and begins to walk with them. The stranger doesn't seem to be aware of the events that have taken place in Jerusalem so the disciples share their story. They explain how disappointed they are because they had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ "the one who would set Israel free." The stranger listens and then he begins to interpret their Hebrew scriptures and he explains how Jesus' life and death had fulfilled many of the prophecies found there. The disciples continue on their way listening and being enlightened by the words of the stranger.

This week, as I was searching for inspiration, I googled "Jesus and stranger" and found this true story shared by a man named Jim Forest. He wrote

I often think of a nun who gave me a ride from Louisville to Lexington when I was in Kentucky to give a few lectures. It's now too long ago for me to remember her name, but I will never forget the spirit of welcome that she radiated. Her old, battered car is also not easily forgotten, though it would have been worth little in a used-car lot. In her care it had become a house of hospitality on wheels.

As we drove along the highway, the glove compartment door in front of me kept popping open. I closed it repeatedly, each time noticing a pile of maps inside and also a book. At last the text on the spine of the book caught my eye: "Guests." I pulled it out, discovering page after page of

signatures, most of which gave the impression that the person signing was barely literate.

“What is this?” I asked. “Oh that’s my guest book.” “But why keep it in the car?” “Well, I always pick up hitchhikers, so I need a guest book.” It was very matter-of-fact to her, but I was astonished. Though I had been a hitchhiker myself back in my early twenties, I knew picking up hitchhikers was a risky business. “But isn’t that dangerous?” I asked. “Well, I have had many guests sitting where you are now, most of them men, and I never felt I was in danger.”

She went on to explain that when she pulled over to offer a ride, she immediately introduced herself by name. Then she asked, “And what’s your name?” The immediate exchange of names, she explained, was a crucial first step in hospitality and, it occurred to me, one likely to make for greater safety. “Once two people entrust their names to each other,” she explained, “there is a personal relationship.”

The next step was to ask the guest to put his name in writing: “I would be grateful if you would sign my guest book.” She didn’t have to explain to me that few of the people she had given rides to had ever been regarded as anyone’s guests, and fewer still had been invited to sign a guest book. “I’ve met many fine people,” she told me, “people who have been a

blessing to me. I never had any troubles, though you could see that many of them had lived a hard life.” <http://jimandnancyforest.com/2012/07/stranger/>

I'm not suggesting that we all go out and start picking up hitchhikers. But this is a wonderful illustration of how being open and welcoming to the stranger can be a blessing in our own lives. So we need to ask ourselves, “How do we remain open without putting ourselves in undue danger? How do we recognize Christ in others in ways that balance safety with hospitality? As Jim Forest goes on to point out “There is no such thing as finding Christ while avoiding our neighbor.”

In today's reading, when the disciples drew near to Emmaus they urged this stranger, this person they had just met to stay with them for a meal. And it was during the meal, when their guest broke the bread, that the disciples recognized Jesus, the Christ, in this stranger from the road.

It was only after Jesus was gone that the disciples said, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scripture to us?” Sometimes we don't realize the significance of an encounter with a stranger until it is over. Christ, the essence of love, the ground of our being, shows up at unexpected times and in unexpected people and we just need to remain open to the possibility.

Our lives can be described as a pilgrimage of discovery, a great journey into discovering ourselves in Christ's company with eyes wide open, a state of being that is described in a Celtic prayer attributed to St. Patrick:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.

So be it. Amen.