

“THE WARMTH OF RECOGNITION”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
April 10, 2005

Sermon Text: Luke 24:13-35

Now another reason I had to excuse her (speaking of Caroline, his wife) is I've thought better of one of my opening illustrations, which I didn't particularly want her to hear.

A seven-year-old boy asked his father, who was a minister, he said, "Dad, why do you pray before you preach?" He said, "Well, son, I ask God to help me." The boy thought a minute and said, "Well, why doesn't he?"

Our children can humble us. Old friends can humble us, too. I've got a story of recognition, and you'll know now why I asked Caroline to help with the lunch. A recognition that happened to me just a few years ago, and I tell it at great personal risk. I went into an optician's office to pick up some glasses for my daughter, and there behind the counter, I was in a line about four people back, was an old girlfriend named Susan. It was only the second time in 20 years that I had seen her, and all I could figure is that apparently something was wrong with her eyes because she didn't seem to recognize me. It was busy. As the line got shorter, I thought to myself, "Boy, is she going to be embarrassed not recognizing me." I mean, this girl wrote me love letters. She taught me to kiss. And she didn't recognize me! I remember thinking, "I hope she doesn't make a big scene when I get up there." I moved to the window and our eyes met, and she said, "Oh hey Jimmy." She did recognize me. She just didn't care!

Now another story of recognition, on the road to Emmaus. I can identify with the two disciples who were walking down that seven-mile road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were dejected. They were sad. Their faces were twisted with grief. It was evening, and that means they were walking toward the setting sun, traveling west from Jerusalem to the town Emmaus where they would be spending the night. A stranger started walking along beside them. He sees their forlorn faces, and asks, "What is it you're talking about that's making you so sad?" And maybe it was the glare of the sunset, some commentators say, or the twilight of the darkness or perhaps something else that caused them not to recognize this stranger's face. In any case, they responded, "Have you not heard?" They stopped walking, dumbfounded, and said, "Haven't you heard? Where have you been this last week? Are you the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard? Our Lord Jesus came to Jerusalem. Didn't you hear the fanfare, the goings on, the trial, the execution? Didn't you hear about him? The people loved him. He was at least a prophet, and more than that, we thought he would be the one, the one to set us free from the oppression of the Romans, but our own leaders have put him to death. Now we have heard some farfetched tale from the women about finding Jesus' tomb empty and being told by angels that he is alive. All this stuff, the good, the hope, the death, the rumors, it makes us sick. We don't know what to believe." Have you ever had your hopes up one day and then dashed to the ground the next? Most of us have. What seems like good news all of a sudden turns bad.

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I had a friend, this actually happened to him at my last church, he thought that everything was going great. In fact, he thought that he was going to get a promotion so when he was called into his boss' office, and his boss started saying how good he had been for the company, how much he had added to the business, he thought, “Here comes the promotion.” Instead, after being complimented, he was fired. Later, trying to put a good spin on it, he said, “My boss called me the cornerstone of our organization, and then said, “We're cutting corners.” It's true. He ended well though.

Maybe you've had some similar expectations or anticipations which went downhill fast. Maybe the unexpected death of a loved one. Or the loss of a job. Or a vision or a dream that went haywire. Or perhaps just a battery of daily frustrations associated with your home, or your family life, or your work, or your finances, or even with your church. Imagine, some people even get upset with their church, and you can't find God in it anywhere. In the midst of our disappointment, and our anger, and our depression, our frustration, our despair, sometimes we question if Christ is really in the world, in our lives. When everything seems like a sunset, everything looks dark, we may begin to think to ourselves, “Yes, there once might have been a Jesus. There once might have been a God, but now in my life, I cannot find him. I cannot find God in my life.” We may think, “Maybe it's time I packed my bags and left. Maybe I should try something else, forget about my hopes, my dreams, and simply lose myself in a daily routine. Let the rest of the world carry on with its hopes and delusions, as for me, I am finished. I'm tired of hope.” But look, says our Gospel reading, look, there is more to what's happening in your life than what is apparent to your eyes. Sometimes we cannot even see right in front of us God's hope. There is cause for hope. There is purpose for living. There is reason for joy and life.

The stranger asked the two disillusioned disciples, and I'm paraphrasing, but he said, “Haven't you read your Bible? How foolish you are! What about all those Sunday school stories, those songs and lessons and hymns that you learned when you were growing up? Do you not remember what it says about the Messiah?” Then he recounts to them all that was said about the Messiah in Scriptures, beginning with Genesis and Exodus and continuing all through the teachings and the writings of the prophets. And here's a challenge for all of us, what sort of Savior are we looking for? Is it the Christ portrayed, the Messiah portrayed in the Bible or a Jesus of some other kind that we have concocted in our own minds. Perhaps our Christ is one we've made up to answer every whim and fancy. Or perhaps a gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who never challenges our faith, or lack of it. Or maybe we've looked for a social action Jesus to wipe out all of the world's problems that have been created – by human hands! Or a spiritual Jesus who takes us around a wonderland of the Bible in whirlwind, high mountaintop religious

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experiences, but never gets us involved at all in other people in a way where we share love and forgiveness and grace. We've been looking for a Messiah, a hero, a superstar, somewhere along the road, the real Jesus may have walked alongside us, and we didn't recognize him. Perhaps. Perhaps because we've been looking for someone else, then the moment of recognition, where they said, "...were not our hearts burning within us?" They remembered that God comes in these ways. They understood now that the Scripture said the Messiah would come and would be rejected as Isaiah reports in Isaiah 53, verses 3-5, "He was despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows yet we esteemed him stricken and smitten by God and afflicted, but he was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole. And with his stripes we were healed." Isaiah 53. Their hopes had been in a cultural Christ, a folk hero Messiah who would raise an army and throw out the corrupt politicians and restore a just and fair government to Israel. They wanted earthly peace and paradise, and they wanted it on their terms, and they wanted it right now. What they remembered was that the entire world needed a Savior and everyone in it. As they spoke to him, they remembered not just one people in one place or another, but the entire world needed a Messiah and everyone in it. Not just from political oppression and from injustice although these things are sore evil realities, but from sin and death itself. God was in Christ, I paraphrase from Colossians, making peace by the blood of his cross, and they esteemed him not because they were looking for something else, a different sort of Savior. The warmth of recognition came only when they understood the risen Christ as Savior on a grander and larger and more universal scale than their time bound hopes allowed.

I am, as you are beginning to know, one of the most forgetful people you'll ever meet. I forget bad things and good things. I can't even remember all the things that I have forgotten. One thing we all forget is the times when, in our walk with God, God was near. Now try to remember, because you know what I'm speaking about. You know that time that you prayed and you pleaded and you promised God, "If you get me through this, I'll never wander off again." You remember that? And then miraculously you got through it, and then we start to wonder, did God really do that? And we feel all funny inside, a little misty-eyed and strange, and maybe warm in our heart, and we think about our promise and then we think how we were delivered, and then we say, nah, that wasn't God, that just happened, and we forget all about it until the next time we're in trouble up to about here. The walk to Emmaus, I've been down that road, all upset because God has let us down, and just when we thought things were going nowhere, a dead end, no way out, God shows up. Have you been on that road? Notice the disciples told their story

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with a compulsion. They were compelled to tell it like the wedding guest in Coleridge’s poem, “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner.” Their story was so bad they had to tell it, and so they told it to the stranger like they owned that disappointment themselves. They told the stranger how high their hopes were, and how, apparently, God had let them down. They gripped the stranger as an audience for their grief, for their disappointment, the betrayal of their dreams, because Jesus seemed so right, and now he seemed to be dead and gone. They were starting to doubt. Maybe they were wrong to hope. Oh what fools they had been! God wasn’t in him after all. It was a long, strange trip that found Jesus in the grave, and now his body missing, and they didn’t know what to believe. They thought he was from God, now they weren’t sure. They were let down. They were betrayed. We have felt that way. When it happens to us, we think the whole world ought to know and ought to understand. The trouble is, when it happens to us, most of the time we don’t understand. What they thought was God letting them down, was not. It was God fulfilling a grander plan to offer salvation to the entire world. Haven’t you been angry and disappointed at God for allowing certain things that you didn’t understand in your life to occur, and then later on, maybe much, much later, maybe decades later, you look back, and you see that God was working, even in that moment of disappointment, even in that dead end, even in what you thought was a dead end. We know that every time we look deeply at the cross, every time we look deeply at the cross, that God has a way of bringing hope out of dead ends, light out of darkness. It is good to remember Jesus’ own example on the road to Emmaus when he began with Moses and all the Scriptures concerning himself, and he said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law and Moses and the prophets.” Fulfillment of the law and rejection and an unjust death and atonement for sin and then resurrection.

Yes, faith is a journey, and Scripture may hold truths that we have not comprehended yet. It took an understanding of Scripture from beginning to end for these disciples to recognize Jesus, who was right there beside them. So many people have gone through the disciple Bible study, and said to me over the years, “I could have sworn that this passage here was not in my Bible the last time I read it.” The Bible doesn’t change, but you do, and as you grow in faith, some of those passages you skipped over begin to make more sense. Perhaps God journeys nearer you than you think, but you’ve not yet learned to discern his presence. The Christ of our imaginations, the Christ of our expectations may keep us from seeing the Christ in the world. Their eyes were opened, and then he was gone. Maybe they said, did it really happen, or was he really here, or must I remember all that he taught us. Some meet him, and go back to business as usual. How strange! Encounters with God should change us, shouldn’t they?

I’m told a story, and I’ll not name names though some of you know this story of an older Methodist pastor and a younger one. They were father and son. They sat and they ate on

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opposite sides of the table, just after annual conference. They were on opposite sides of a very divisive issue, the merger of the black and white conferences. It was hotly debated. The father stood to keep things as they were, and the son stood on the other side. They scarcely spoke a word. They were eating together only for the sake of the mother and wife. The son could not budge from his position, and the father could not budge from his. As the meal began, the son took a loaf of bread, and he broke it, and he gave a piece to his father, and the father tore a piece of the bread, and he gave it back to the son. Still they were slow to speak, but in quiet tears and glances, as I was told the story, they began to understand that peace is possible, that in Christ, even when people of good will disagree over fundamental issues, peace is possible. It wasn't actually communion at that table, but don't you think that Jesus was present? I do. Look in your life for moments when Jesus comes through and reminds you, no matter what brokenness we pass through, he gave himself broken on a cross that we might have peace. He gave himself broken on the cross that we might be healed and made whole. He gave us love, forgiveness and grace sufficient not only for us, but enough that we might share and give the same to others. In our brokenness, he came to us and spoke. Don't you remember those timeless moments when you knew that God was near? In our brokenness, he is always near and then we forget. He comes, and we rejoice at his presence, and then we journey on and we wonder where God went. Strange how we do that. We're made whole. We're given peace. We're given hope in our souls. Then we turn our backs, and we wander off, and sometimes we will say aloud, “Where is God?” And there he was just now, beside us. When you pray deeply and recognize who it is who died for you, does not your heart burn within you, and that recognition and that warmth of recognition of who Christ is and what God has done in Christ on the cross for you, does it not make you realize that God is with you at all times, forever?

I'll close with a story of the Oxford professor and agnostic at one time, C. S. Lewis. He came to recognize the presence of Christ, he wrote, on the roof of an English double decker bus on a trip to the zoo. Not at a revival! Not in church! But on the second story of a double decker bus in England on a trip to the zoo! Imagine! God works in ways God wants to. He wrote this, “When we set out, I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, but when we reached the zoo, I did.” He writes, “It was more like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.” And so I pray that you awaken to those times when God has come near, that you pray for those times and the open mind and spirit and soul to receive them. I close with words of Charles Wesley from hymn #613, “Unseal the volume of thy grace, apply the Gospel word, open our eyes to see thy face, our hearts to know the Lord.” May your heart burn within you, this day and forevermore.