

“Two or Three”
Luke 24:13-35
Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson today comes from Luke, Chapter 24 and I'm going to read verses 13 through 35. "That same day two of Jesus' disciples were going to the village of Emmaus, which was about 7 miles from Jerusalem. As they were talking and thinking about what had happened, Jesus came near and started walking along beside them. But they did not know who he was. Jesus asked them 'What were you talking about as you walked along?' The two of them stood there looking sad and gloomy. Then the one named Cleopas asked Jesus 'Are you the only person from Jerusalem who did not know what was happening there these last few days?' 'What do you mean?', Jesus asked and they answered 'Those things that happened to Jesus from Nazareth by what he did and said, he showed that he was a powerful prophet who pleased God and all the people. Then the chief priests and our leaders had him arrested and sentenced to die on a cross. We had hoped that he would be the one to set Israel free, but it has already been three days since all of this happened. Some women in our group surprised us. They had gone to the tomb early in the morning, this morning, but did not find the body of Jesus. They came back saying that they had seen a vision of angels who told them that Jesus is alive. Some men from our group went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but Jesus they did not see.' Then Jesus asked the two disciples 'Why can't you understand, how can you be so slow to believe all that the prophet said. Didn't you know that the Messiah would have to suffer before he was given his glory?' Jesus then explained everything written about himself in the scriptures, beginning with the law of Moses and the books of the prophets. When the two of them came near the village where they were going, Jesus seemed to be going further. But they begged him, 'Stay with us it's already late and the sun is going down' so Jesus went into the house to stay with them. After Jesus sat down to eat he took some bread, he blessed it, and broke it then he gave it to them, at once they knew he was, but he disappeared. They said to each other 'when he talked to us along the road and explained the scripture to us did it not warm our hearts?', so they got right up and returned to Jerusalem and the two disciples found the 11 apostles and the others gathered together and they learned from that group that the Lord was really alive and appeared to Peter also. Then the disciples from Emmaus told what had happened on the road and how they knew he was the Lord when he broke the bread." The word of God for the people of God, Thanks be to God.

I would like to start with a story this morning. A friend of mine was getting on a health kick and he needed a scale so he went to the store and was looking over the variety there.

He found one that was high-tech. It was digital. It would analyze body mass index and this one even spoke. It had a couple of settings; it would do inspirational sayings or humorous sayings depending on what your preference was. He got this scale home and, I'm not sure what he thought about what the scale read when he stepped on it, but apparently the scale did not appreciate what it was looking at for it screamed out at him "one at a time, one at a time!". Well, I'm not sure how motivational or helpful that would be if I were working on my weight, but we live in a "one at a time" kind of culture. We are very big about my turn, my space, our individuality and yet this cultural tendency, this mood, this movement in our culture is very out of step with scripture. Today is one of those passages where that comes through.

I would like to start with a little bit of commentary. This is an interesting passage. Luke carefully crafts this story. In fact, of all the gospel writers, it is speculated that Luke really took the most care in terms of setting the scene for the stories that he was relaying from Jesus' life and ministry. So, every detail here is important. Some things that are worth noting, first of all I'm sure you caught the context that this is Easter day. It is evening, but still, it's Easter day. These disciples are walking along just experienced all the trauma, all the drama, of the passion week and they're leaving. They're leaving because Jesus is dead. Because there is nothing left to do because their hopes, their dreams, and everything, all the possibility and the potential that they associated with Jesus, is gone. They walk along sad and dejected. But there are some details in this story that are worth making note.

First of all, Luke singles out these two disciples walking along. We can assume or guess that there were other disciples heading back to their homes and villages and no doubt there were a number of individuals on the road that day and yet Jesus chose to reveal himself not to one of these individuals, but to these two, two disciples, not one, but two. It says they are going along, walking and sharing together. Its into that context, in that context of their fellowship, in the context of their sharing, that Jesus steps in and starts unfolding or starts explaining the scriptures to them. The other part that emphasizes the two in this story is the breaking of the bread. Luke isn't so much bringing to mind the last supper, although that is part of it, he is bringing together kind of all these instances where Jesus used the meal and the table and the fellowship around the table to teach about himself and about the Kingdom of God. It's this setting of fellowship, its this setting of family and familiarity and hospitality where Jesus reveals himself.

Its interesting that the disciples don't recognize Jesus, so there apparently is something about his appearance that has changed enough, and yet it is exactly in this very familiar act of Jesus breaking the bread, an act that they had seen, who knows how many times before. But in these familiarity actions of breaking the bread it is there that Jesus is made known to them. Of course at that instance Jesus disappears.

We can only imagine how different the conversation is as they travel back to Jerusalem. The first conversation filled with the hopelessness, the darkness, the despair, and yet on the return trip, their conversation is filled with hope and possibility and light because they had been visited by the risen Christ, that he is alive. And so, Luke uses this story and this event to describe or to illustrate, to highlight, the communal nature of our faith. As I said, Luke carefully crafts his story and he uses the two. He uses the table.

John Wesley referred to this dynamic also. He is often quoted for saying "there is no holiness except social holiness.". Now there is a couple of ways to take that, but first and foremost it means that we are not saved in a vacuum. It always happens in the context of a community, in a context of others. First of all, none of us are saved alone because it starts, is first or foremost, with a relationship with Jesus Christ, but that relationship is also a relationship with the body of Christ so that we are in this fellowship, we are in this family, in this body of believers. No holiness apart from social holiness.

An illustration comes from the Monastics of the third century. Emperor Augustine was converted to Christianity and declared it the official religion of the Roman Empire shortly before his death. Well the church went from being persecuted to being endorsed by the empire and with it came the power and the prestige and the protection of the Roman Empire. But with it also came all the temptations that go with it, and so materialism started creeping into the church, political power grabbing started working its way into the church. There were this group of men, and women, who saw what was happening and removed themselves from the church, removed themselves from society. They went out into the desert to serve God, to preserve a purity of faith. So there were these individuals living in caves and crude shelters across the wilderness of the Roman Empire. At first it was just individuals here and there but they discovered quickly that they could not create the Kingdom of God, the community of God, without others. They could not serve Christ without having others to serve in the name of Christ. So they started gathering into communities, into monasteries and convents. In that context their faith flourished and they created a community that was a hallmark of the Kingdom of God. So much so, that it's argued that the monasteries and the convents really preserved much of western culture and learning during the dark ages---but that's another story. It's really the same thing that Jesus gets at in Matthew 18:20, "where two or three are gathered together, there I am with them also." And it's not so much a matter that we are moving our faith from being private to public; although there certainly is a place for that, there is a time and a place for our faith to be public, it must be, it has to be. But, what Luke, what Matthew, what John Wesley, what Jesus are talking about here, is moving our faith from private to corporate. Understanding that we cannot go it alone, in order to thrive as Christians we must share our faith, that we must share this journey with others,

with the body of Christ, with fellow believers.

Well McCabe took the Natural Church Development survey and you heard Lois talk about that at the beginning of worship. Passionate spirituality was the area that we needed to work on most. We went up 18 points in passionate spirituality, 18 points is an incredible jump. That's almost three times what the average church gains on their first survey on their minimum factor, or the place they need the most work. 18 points is an incredible gain, and yet, passionate spirituality is still our weakest point. Well, an 18 point gain tells us that we are on the right track. We have done "Three Simple Rules," there is a group that's meeting together talking about Charles Sheldon's book, "In His Steps", even over these summer months. There is a prayer ministry that has really gotten up and running. We are working on that dynamic of integrating our faith and our living. We are experiencing God, we're getting more involved in the church, we are working this area of passion for devotion. And then there is this area of spiritual interconnectedness. These are four areas that make up this whole area of passionate spirituality so I will repeat them again, experiencing God, involvement in church, passion for devotion, and spiritual interconnectedness. Among those four, this whole idea of spiritual interconnectedness, stands out as the area within passionate spirituality that needs the most work. As I said, we are on the right track but boy we still have work ahead of us.

So as we look at this whole dynamic I simply want to ask the question or make the challenge, where is your Emmaus Road: Where is that place where you are sharing faith with your brothers and sisters: Where is that place that your faith moves from private to corporate? Because this is not a one at a time deal, as much as the scale might say, "one at a time, please one at a time". Christianity doesn't work that way. God has wired us, he has wired the church, in such a way that we grow best in community. So how will we connect with one another. Where is your Emmaus road. As you think about that questions, it could very well be that the answer for how McCabe will address this is in your heart and mind. On August 18th, the church will gather again and we will have a "sticky note exercise", we'll have an "affinity" exercise. We will get together and we will deal with this question, "Why are we this way?", "Why is this our minimum factor?" and we will take an honest, and maybe difficult, look at why it is we struggle in this area. But then looking at why we are this way, we will meet again in September and we will look specifically at the issue of how to address it, what are the solutions, what are the possibilities, what are the action steps that we will take to address passionate spirituality, here at McCabe. The answer might be with you and so over the next weeks before these events, I challenge you, to ask "Where is your Emmaus experience?", because you might hold the key for how we will address this issue at McCabe, that indeed we may know the power of Christ working where two or three are gathered because it is not one at a time.