

Party of Four?  
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 24:13-16, 21-35, 44-45

I am continually impressed by the efficiency, proficiency, and professionalism of our staff in partnership with our worship co-chairs. If the vaccine rollout in America turns sluggish or inefficient, it's because these folks aren't organizing it. As we began planning the resumption of in-person worship, there was no detail left untouched by their inquisitive minds, engineering facility, and collective energy. It was quite a sight to witness returning worshipers stepping forward to those welcome stations, where with smiling faces, staff greeted them warmly while simultaneously consulting their color-coded seating charts, consciously calculating where to find that elusive intersection of kinship and social distance. Restaurants would be wise to consult these folks about the best practices for seating the maximum number of patrons efficiently, swiftly and comfortably. *Brown, party of four; your pew is ready. Right this way.*

Have you ever given any thought to the perfect number for going out to dinner? Perhaps, that is one of those things we need to relearn while we're seeking to reincarnate a social life in a world reframed by

pandemic. What's the best number for dining out? Two can be romantic, but the pressure is significantly more intense when you have to carry at least half of the conversation. I'm unimaginative enough that I'd need a flowchart of topics, questions, and observations.

Five is awkward because you are either squeezing a chair up to a table or booth made for four, or you're leaving one person facing thin air down on the end of a table made for six.

Six can work well, but if you're in a restaurant, you are reaching that point where conversation is hindered by the inability to hear anyone. *What'd she say? I didn't catch it.* Observe the larger tables in a restaurant and you'll notice at least a third of the party leaning back, having checked out of a conversation they can't hear.

Four is a good number. Whether it's the best, I can't say, but consider the pluses: at most, you're just responsible for 25% of the conversation, and if one member of your party is ... loquacious, your contribution may go down to 10%. With four, it's easier to get a table, and the table is small enough that even in a loud restaurant you can lean in and still hear your dining companions.

Four is a good number for dinner, conversation, road trip, tennis, golf, and Go Fish. I would go so far as to say that four is the minimum number that need to be in some form present and accounted for whenever you open the Bible. And I'm not only talking about group bible study. I'm saying that four is the minimum even when you are curled up alone in your favorite chair with your Bible under the light of the lamp you inherited from your grandmother. Four, when you're alone? Hear me out. I think our text today is instructive in this regard.

It was on a Sunday, that first sacred Sunday, as Christ followers stumbled through the fog that hovers low between anguish and expectancy, between privation and purpose, where evidence is sketchy, and rumors are rampant. Reports of an empty tomb were multiplying but what could that mean? What did any of this mean? They had fallen through some sort of looking glass into a Bizarro world where down is up, out is in, and nothing makes sense.

Of course, nothing had made sense since at least Thursday night. A trader in their midst? An arrest outside a garden. Crowds that had exulted this teacher named Jesus suddenly demanding his crucifixion. Disciples were scattering. Women were weeping. A Pharisee and a

Roman Centurion were the only ones exemplifying God's grace. It was all so confusing, disorienting; one of those times when you grab your coat and head for the door. Where are you going? *I don't know*. What are you hoping to find or do? *I don't know*. Why are you leaving? *I don't know*. And what is it that we'll say when we don't have a clue? *I just need to get some air. I just need to drive. I need to go for a walk.*

And so, Luke reports, "Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened."

Why Emmaus? We don't know and it could be that they didn't know either. It obviously wasn't a destination, because they returned to Jerusalem the same night. Sometimes you just have to move, go, bolt, bounce, snag that breath of fresh air, or at least any air not gorged with mind-garbling voices talking of conspiracy and fraud. Break away from the noise. Find that person with whom you can actually process such a strange series of events.

On the way to Emmaus, they were joined by an outgoing fellow looking for conversation and seemingly unaware of the trauma rocking

Jerusalem. So, the traveler named Cleopas asked him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He goes on to fill the stranger in on all the events right up to the mystery of the empty tomb, and also confesses what has troubled them most. "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Not only were they grieving the loss of One they loved and revered; not only were they in shock over how bad things had turned so fast; they were also left to question the validity of their beliefs and left without any sense of what the future held for them.

Still unrecognized, Jesus senses a teaching moment and reframes their account in the context of their own scriptures. "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared ... Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." Then, "when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." Later, when the risen Jesus appears before the disciples, we see the same phenomenon at work, as Luke reports, Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still

with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...

We memorialize moments such as this in our hymns: "Break Thou, the bread of life, dear Lord, to me ... Beyond the sacred page, I seek thee, Lord;" "Open my eyes that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me."

Jesus reframes his followers' reading of their inherited scriptures in the light of what God was doing and revealing through him. Similarly, with Christ as Lord, we must read all scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. That, in no way diminishes the sacred nature or independent meaning of the Hebrew texts, but we, as Christ's disciples, can never read them as though Jesus Christ is not fundamental to who we are, wherever we are. When my wife and I are in different locations, I am still married. Even though our eldest child lives on the other side of the country, we are still his parents. It is who we are, and in Christ, we cannot read anything, do anything, go anywhere without this Jesus, because Christ is sewn into our identity.

Do you know St. Patrick's prayer? It is helpful in understanding this idea.

“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 every man who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.”

"Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures..." Just as Christ was with those travelers on the road to Emmaus and at table with them, so too, Christ is in our minds and in our hearts each time we open the Bible.

However, a table for two will not be sufficient for our study. There is another presence on the road with those travelers, a presence with them as they sit at table and eat, with them as they rejoin the disciples in Jerusalem. Luke reports, "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him..." It wasn't the actual breaking of bread that triggered

their recognition, or else the waitstaff at Firebirds would be wearing vestments. What opens their eyes to the presence of Jesus, what opens their minds to the meaning of the sacred texts is the Holy Spirit.

Of the sacraments, Calvin said, "if the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears." Karl Barth referred to the Holy Spirit as "God's awakening power," awakening us to the presence of Christ, awakening us to the meaning of scripture. In *A Declaration of Faith*, it is said, "The Spirit adds no different Word from God, but leads us deeper into the truth of God uttered in Jesus Christ." The prayer for Illumination that we offer in worship before the reading of scripture is not meant to be limited to Sunday's worship, but offered each time we open the Bible. As I prayed just a few moments ago, "Holy Spirit, be our guest. Take the words of these pages and form them into your Word for us."

So, the table upon which our Bible is open, has welcomed three, but there is still an empty chair. Remember that Cleopas wasn't walking alone to Emmaus. There was someone along with him who is mentioned but not named. I wonder if that was intentional. I wonder if

that unnamed fellow traveler could represent the church. We were never meant to walk this journey alone. Writer Anne Lamott once quipped, "Teenagers who do not go to church are adored by God, but they don't get to meet some of the people who love God back."

The Confession of 1967 says, "The Holy Spirit creates and renews the church as the community in which people are reconciled to God and to one another. The Spirit enables people to receive forgiveness as they forgive one another and to enjoy the peace of God as they make peace among themselves. In spite of their sin, the Spirit gives people power to become representatives of Jesus Christ and his gospel of reconciliation to all."

One of the highlights of my week is the opportunity to be together with fellow seekers in our weekly Wednesday Bible studies. We don't gather as the illumined and knowledgeable few. I mean, they let me lead it, after all. We gather as those who have experienced something of Jesus, but we want to know more. We gather to look at our world and our shared lives through the lens of scripture, listen for how our individual lives intersect in the words of scripture. Trusting in Christ, listening for the Spirit, asking questions, wrestling with texts, finding

some peace with unanswered questions, interacting with each other's stories, laughing, praying. Some of us have been doing it for years, but we're always excited to welcome others, even in this glorious/maddening era of Zoom.

We need one another. And even when I read the scriptures alone in my office or at home, they are with me, as are you, as is Christ, as is the Spirit, for in order for me to be me, and in order for you to be you, we need Christ, we need the Spirit, and we need each other. A table for four, please, the one with the Bible on it. Amen.