

“The Stranger”
Sermon Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI

Luke 24:13-49
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For Private Distribution Only

If you're at all detail oriented, chances are you'll find something to wrestle with in this passage. For starters, Emmaus, a location never mentioned in Luke's gospel until now, is elusive as villages go. Despite their best attempts, scholars have been unable to identify a place by that name within 7 miles of Jerusalem. Then there's this Cleopas person. You might call him a one-hit-wonder: He emerges, plays a key role in this well known post-resurrection scene, then disappears from the gospel front, never to be heard from again. As for his companion, not only is that individual unnamed, but it's never even revealed whether they're male or female! On top of all that, Jesus' identity is hidden through most of the episode. Until he breaks bread at their destination, this is just a friendly stranger on the highway.

Maybe it's different here in rural northwestern Michigan, but, raised as I was in the suburbs of Boston, my mother taught me not to talk to strangers. In our family's version of the warning, strangers were scary unknowns. They often had questionable agendas and tended to lead children astray in one way or another. Kind of like a villain from a Grimm's fairy tale or a Disney movie. And all too often, it seems, the nightly news confirms these, our deepest and worst fears. From such a guarded, fear-based vantage point, it's amazing that the overtures of this unrecognizable Jesus were so readily accepted. Nowadays, I expect that suspicion or at least skepticism would more likely greet a hitchhiker who wants in on a private conversation. Then again, these two people were in the throes of grief, raw and vulnerable, and trying to make sense of their teacher's death. They may have actually appreciated the concern of an outsider and the opportunity to share their story.

But, the thing is, not only does Jesus ask them a lot of questions, he is hard on these two souls! He calls them “foolish” and “slow of heart,” and challenges their knowledge of scripture. Is that really the kind of stranger we want in your midst, someone who’s going to size us up and challenge us, just like that? “Hit the road, Jack!” probably wouldn’t have been an unreasonable response to Jesus’ unsolicited feedback. But these two friends instead erred on the side of hospitality, inviting Jesus to spend the evening with them because of the late hour. As it turned out, that decision was pivotal: Permitting their eyes to be opened to Jesus’ presence as he broke bread at their table and their hearts to recall the warmth felt as he had interpreted scriptures for them earlier that day. The disciples’ welcome and openness to a mysterious man enabled them to be taught, ministered to, surprised, and, ultimately, to encounter the divine.

Given the relative anonymity of these various characters and their physical location, I wonder whether we might insert ourselves into their story and make it our own. Could the vagueness of the details actually have been an intentional “fill-in-the-blanks” technique on the author’s part?

As I pondered these questions during the week, a road trip of my own came to mind: While studying in England one fall, two college friends and I visited Paris over a long weekend. On the return trip we had difficulty locating our bus terminal. As darkness fell, we exited the nearly deserted Metro station of the same name and asked passersby for directions. Each person we stopped eyed our luggage anxiously, hurriedly responded that the station was not within walking distance, then, just before turning away, added that we must be careful because there were “a lot of Africans” in the area. All that registered for us was that this was not our destination. And so we re-entered the Metro and rode to busier stops, where we encountered the tear gas of police

ridding the system of vagrants and the disinterest of information booth workers who claimed to have not a clue what I was asking in my American-accented French.

By this time we had missed our bus and realized that we would need to spend another night in Paris. We could not decide what to do next, as one friend had little money left and was unwilling to borrow from us. And so we hailed a cab. “Do you know of a cheap student hotel where you could take us?” I queried the driver. “Non.” I did my best to explain our predicament to him. He thought for a moment and finally reported that he had a friend who guarded the bus station we sought and perhaps could help us. The cabbie drove us there, went in to find his friend, and returned triumphant. The friend was in fact working and could allow us to stay in the closed station until his shift ended. We entered and met the guard, a large South African man. He directed us to a locker area, telling us that we were welcome to sleep there until 5 am.

Observing us as we attempted to shape our bags into bedding, he quickly removed his own coat and laid it down on the dirty floor for us as a makeshift bed. After thanking him, my friends quickly drifted off to sleep. Still filled with energy, I remained awake. The guard sat nearby, quietly watching over us. I sensed that he longed for company, and somehow a dialogue began between the two of us. We searched for a common language and settled on French. Small talk about my studies in England and the British monarchy gradually gave way to the dramatic story of his escape from apartheid South Africa and his journey to France.

I don't know his name or much about him, but, to this day, not Notre Dame, not the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre, but this man remains my favorite memory of Paris. We were and are strangers, with no more in common than our humanity and a basic knowledge of the French

language. Yet he risked his job to let us stay in that station, dirtied his own coat for our comfort, and shared a bit of his journey with me. According to the pedestrians at the Metro stop several miles away, we were supposed to fear him. Thankfully, we never had a chance. The frenzied search for shelter kept us open, and he in turn extended the most radical hospitality I have ever experienced. His welcome was particularly remarkable considering the encounters he'd had with hate-filled people of my race on two separate continents. I have no idea what his religion was. Yet I cannot help but glimpse Christ in his deeds and a spark of the divine in the connection that was made in spite of profound differences. In the end, I believe each of us was surprised and nourished by the encounter.

As our denomination declares, God is still speaking. Exactly how that occurs remains a mystery. The details are, perhaps, unimportant and likely to be a little fuzzy. But, if we truly believe we are the body of Christ, one place to look is in our interactions with one another—stranger, friend, acquaintance, foe—and in the spaces in between. As the letter to the Hebrews says, some have entertained angels unawares.

And so I challenge us all to fill in our own blanks in the road to Emmaus story again and again.

Yet the plot doesn't end there. For Jesus will return to the gathered disciples once more, eat with them and bear witness to his new life, fill them with understanding, and commission them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations and to act as witnesses to all these things...

We too are at that table with Jesus each time we celebrate communion together; indeed, whenever we gather as the Church. May we therefore enter this space and the world outside our doors with open hearts and minds, which enable us to transcend our differences and glimpse

God. And may we share our sacred stories in the hopes that other hearts might in turn be opened and one day the vision of God be realized--Where peace, justice, and compassion are the rule, unity in diversity is celebrated, and the stranger is embraced as family evermore.

Amen.