

The Memory of Influence

Luke 24:13-35

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The highlights of this story are evident in the events recounted by Cleopas and the unnamed disciple. The two of them tell the other disciples of Jesus “what had happened on the road” and how they had recognized Jesus “in his breaking of the bread.” Although (1) their grief in the midst of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial and (2) their confusion at the rumor that his body was no longer in the grave left them both sorrowful and feeling a sort of “reality-vertigo,” they could never forget his influence upon them. And their memory of his influence was prompted by (1) the way he had of teaching Scripture and (2) the way he had of breaking bread.

We likely know much more about the ways Jesus taught Scripture than we do about the way he broke bread. There are numerous examples in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John about Jesus’ teachings which grew from his knowledge of Scripture. Nowhere, though, is mentioned what was idiosyncratic or unique about the way he broke bread; but you and I know how such recognition was possible by Cleopas and the unnamed disciple. You and I have noticed the characteristics of others’ movements, the phrases they use, the tone of their voice in calm or in excitement, the expression on their face and in their eyes when they are inviting increased engagement by those facing them, or the expression on their face and in their eyes when they’ve heard something absurd and hardly believable. When I was between 8 and 15 years old, I noticed that my dad entered the house at the end of a work day with an unmistakable sound: a double-click in the folding of his sunglasses. Anytime I was around the corner from the front door, and the door opened and closed, and the hard plastic of the earpieces clicked, I knew who had entered. As for my mother, late in the evening when she was dressed for working her 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift at the hospital or after she dressed for an evening with her bridge group, when I smelled her perfume, I knew she was still in the house but was almost ready to leave, or she had just departed.

People have characteristic movements, ways of speaking, peering, acting, and Jesus was no exception. We are not surprised that Cleopas and the unnamed disciple did not quite catch on when the stranger they encountered taught them from Scripture in way that seemed somewhat familiar, but it was when they noticed the way he broke the bread that it all came together. Jesus who was crucified, who had died on that cross and been buried, was – in the mystery of God’s power of love – somehow back with them; and then, “just like that,” they could not see him physically. That fast: They recognized him; he “was known to them;” and then he was invisible!

Luke’s gospel account notes at least three roads in Jesus’ adult life. (1) In chapter 10 (vv.25-37, esp. v.30), Jesus tells a parable about man who leaves Jerusalem and walks northeast toward the town of Jericho. That day, on that road, in that story, the man was attacked by bandits, and was severely beaten and robbed. (2) In chapter 18 (vv.35-43), Jesus encounters a blind man on the way into Jericho, from the northeast. The story indicates that this blind man could “see” more authenticity and genuineness in Jesus than most other persons whose sight was 20-20. At the end of their meeting, the man becomes a disciple of Jesus, follows him into Jericho and out the southwest side of town on the way to Jerusalem, where Jesus, in ten or so days, is crucified. So there is the road out of Jerusalem toward Jericho, and the road into Jericho from the opposite direction and then through Jericho back toward Jerusalem. (3) Now there is this road to Emmaus. Some Biblical researchers believe Emmaus lies west of Jerusalem about as far as from here to

Snook. Others say we today can't actually substantiate where Emmaus was or is. Isn't that about as suitable a situation for you and me to fit into this story as anyone could anticipate or plan?

Think about this. There's an unnamed disciple in this story. He or she could be you, and could be anyone. And there's a town with a name but no location. What if Emmaus is moveable? What if Emmaus is everywhere? Then you and I are in this story, as is anyone else, similar to us or different. All are invited wherever road to Emmaus is, wherever their Emmaus village is in life, on any given day or in any given season. All are invited to listen to a Stranger who teaches and lives the witness of Scripture in revealing the steadfast faithfulness of God, willing daily to accompany God's people along whatever road in life in whatever direction they are traveling.

Willie Morris was raised in Yazoo City, Mississippi, about 75 miles northwest of Jackson. He was a student at the University of Texas in Austin beginning about 1952. A year or so after he left Yazoo City for Austin, he was back home briefly and sitting with his dad two weeks before his dad would die of cancer. He writes what his dad said to him then: "No matter what happens, boy, I'll always be watchin' out for you." Willie Morris then writes: "I returned after he died. At the end of the funeral in our Methodist church, the choir sang the finest hymn of them all: "Abide with me: fast falls the even tide. The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide, when other helpers fail, and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me." ["North Toward Home," p.56]

The hymn Willie Morris found so meaningful was written in England in 1847 by Henry Lyte, in his early to mid-fifties and chronically in very poor health. Mr. Lyte's imagery is drawn from the story of the Emmaus travelers, when both Cleopas and the unnamed disciple urge the stranger to join them for supper, saying (at verse 29), "Abide with us for it is almost evening and the day is nearly over." The hymn is a prayer about a day's ending, and it's a prayer about life's ending for all of us, yearning for the presence of the One who already has drawn near.

If Willie Morris' dad said to him from the elder Mr. Morris' deathbed, "No matter what happens, boy, I'll always be watchin' out for you," so much more is Jesus indicating to disciples, "So you invite me to abide, do you? That truly is hospitable; but no matter what happens, I'll always be watchin' out for you – and I always have been."

Cleopas and the unnamed disciples no doubt were thrilled when that stranger entered the diner and sat with them. The waiter brought bread and promised to return. Then the stranger took the bread, broke it, gave it to them, and their eyes were opened! They recognized him! In the candlelight of the room, there's been just enough light for Cleopas and you and me to identify the One who has traveled and taught and now broken bread. Our recognition is what the Lord seeks, encouraging our on-going following and serving and growing, regardless of how downcast we begin or conclude the day, whether Emmaus is a town with which we are oh so familiar, or whether we feel as rootless strangers there. Every time, though, we recognize the One who abides – we do so from love so amazing – from love already given feely and completely for this world in every moment. The influence of what we hear and see and recognize flips a switch in your memory and mine – memory, really, older than any of us, yet sufficiently and powerfully alive in us when we are at our most vulnerable! That memory is activated and influenced by something as simple as the breaking of bread. – All honor and praise be to God.