

Sermons from Park Hill: April 6, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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**“Ordinary, Unexpected, and Divine”
Luke 24: 13-35**

April 6, 2008

There once was a little boy who decided he wanted to meet God. He knew it would probably be a long trip, so he decided to pack a larger than usual lunch – four packs of Twinkies and two cans of root beer. He set out on his journey and went a few blocks beyond where he had ever walked on his own before, until he came to a park. On one of the park benches sat a woman looking at the pigeons. The little boy sat down beside her and watched the pigeons too. After a while, when he grew hungry, he pulled out a pack of Twinkies. As he ate, he noticed the woman watching him, so he offered one to her. She accepted it gratefully and smiled at him. He thought she had the most beautiful smile in the world. Wanting to see it again, he opened a can of root beer and offered her the other can. Once again, she smiled that beautiful smile.

For a long time, the two just sat on that park bench eating Twinkies, drinking root beer, and watching the pigeons. Neither said a word. Finally the little boy recognized it was getting late and he needed to go home. He started to leave, took a few steps, turned back, and gave the woman a big hug. Her smile was brighter than ever before.

When he arrived home, his mother noticed he was particularly happy, but strangely quiet. “What did you do today?” she asked. “Oh, I had lunch in the park with God.” Before his mother could reply, he added, “Did you know, she has most beautiful smile in the world!”

Meanwhile, the woman left the park and returned home. Her son noticed something different about her. “What did you do today, Mom?” he asked. “Oh, I ate Twinkies and drank root beer in the park with God.” Before he could respond to this odd comment, she added, “And you know what? God’s a lot younger than I had imagined.”

Meeting the Divine in the ordinary. Walking down the road with a stranger the day after a horrible event. Sitting at a table and breaking bread. Meeting the Divine in the unexpected.

Edward Hayes, author of *Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim*, offers another version of

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the Emmaus story. His story goes like this: "The Sabbath had ended, and on the first day of the week, the apostles Peter, James, and John, afraid that they would be arrested next, fled from Jerusalem for their safety. At sunset, they stopped at a small inn at the edge of Emmaus for something to eat. Slipping into seats in the corner, they spoke in hushed voices about the death of their Master, discussing all the things that had happened, and how they had hoped he was the one who would liberate Israel. A Greek slave woman came over to their table and, while pouring wine into their cups, asked them, "Why are you men so sad? You look like you've lost your best friend."

Peter replied impatiently, "Woman, we have indeed, but that is no business of yours. Go, and be about your work!" "Sir," the serving woman replied, "I too know the pain of a broken heart; I know the great pain of losing a dear friend. But death is not the end of love!" And then, to their surprise, she lifted up one of the wooden cups she had poured wine into and pronounced a blessing over it and said, "Take and drink, this is..." John jumped to his feet, saying, "Master, Rabbouni!" In an instant, the Greek slave woman vanished from their eyes.

Meeting the Divine in the ordinary and the unexpected. Walking down the road with a stranger the day after a horrible event. Sitting at a table and breaking bread. Now we know: every road and every meal, every park bench and every Twinkie, holds the

promise of recognition and relationship. Meeting the divine; sensing God's presence. In the unexpected "ordinariness" of life.

Hayes tells his alternate story to remind us that although Jesus of Nazareth was a man, and fully male, the risen Christ is neither a he nor a she. The Christ transcends gender and transforms the distinctions of male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. Now, every road, every meal, and every *one* holds the promise of recognition of *and* relationship with the Divine.

I've always like the Emmaus story, and particularly the part where Jesus is recognized in the breaking of the bread. It's why I appreciate a more frequent celebration of Holy Communion. Because on those days, especially the hard days when my mind is distracted by all the events of my life, sometimes words don't speak to me. Sometimes sermons say seemingly nothing, but when I receive the elements of bread and wine, I receive the mystery of God's grace shown on our shared journey and in our shared meal. My heart can recognize what my eyes can't see; my spirit can recognize what my ears can't hear. And just like the two disciples who walked to Emmaus in disappointment and despair but returned to Jerusalem with joy, I can turn around and go right back to the place where I'm needed, energized by the encounter with the Divine in the ordinary – the meal and the journey to it.

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Janet Weiblen, a UCC pastor in North Dakota, reflects, "The fact that Jesus disappears as soon as they recognize him is a reminder that God's presence is always dancing at the edge of our awareness and perception. We can't hold on to it; but we can share it." The fact that they were kept from recognizing it earlier on their own reminds us that God's presence always comes as a gift, not a demand.

So, one part of the story is about recognition and relationship with the divine, appreciating the power of small, ordinary and unexpected moments. But another line also called out to me during the week: verse 21. "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem (or liberate) Israel." So many hopes had been placed on him to free their people from the tyranny of the Roman Empire and the corruption of certain religious leaders. It made me reflect on who so many hopes for the liberation of *our* nation were also placed.

On Friday we observed the 40th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And in just two months, it will be the 40th anniversary of the murder of another man on whom so many hopes had been placed – Bobby Kennedy.

In the *Progressive Review* I found an article written in the *DC Gazette* by Sam Smith on the day after Robert Kennedy's

assassination. He called his death the "hat trick of evil" – President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and now Bobby. "What had been with his brother a grim anomaly had turned into a grisly habit."

He wrote, "While other deaths may have been more tragic to more people, in one respect, Bobby's was the most profound, for it appeared to shut the door on hope. There were attempts to respond to the slaying of Robert Kennedy with affirmations of a will to change the old ways, but they appeared hollow. The nation had watched John Kennedy die and had not changed; it had watched Martin Luther King die and had not changed. Now it watched Robert Kennedy die and even the most effervescent and optimistic among us could not summon a viable vision of a new order to lessen our brooding."

Sam Smith blamed this on the fact that too much of the burden of hope had been placed on too few people. This may have been the cynicism of the day after a tragedy, and it is true that we often look to others to save us, but think of how many ordinary and unexpected people had done such extraordinary things in the pursuit of justice, who had brought the movement for civil rights as far as it had. And though the hopes placed in these leaders had been battered and beaten down, others were now empowered to continue that work.

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Perhaps too many hopes had been placed on Dr. King. But his is not the only death we should remember. I re-watched the movie Bobby this week, which if you've never seen before I highly recommend. In the special features, there was a panel discussion among people who had worked with him. They reminded us it was not just the hat-trick of Dr. King and the Kennedy's, but to remember Medgar Evers, assassinated 45 years ago this June, and Malcolm X, as well.

And then I wondered, well, who is credited as the first person killed working in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. The Civil Rights Memorial Center gives that distinction to Rev. George Lee, murdered May 7, 1955. Rev. Lee used his pulpit and his printing press to urge his fellow African Americans to register to vote in Humphreys County, Mississippi. White officials told him to end his voter registration efforts or be killed. One night, not long after he spoke to a crowd of 7,000 at the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, which had sponsored a successful boycott of gas stations that refused to provide restrooms for African American customers, Rev. Lee was driving home at night. A convertible pulled alongside his car. Three shot-gun blasts shattered his jaw and he drove off the road, where he died of his wounds. An autopsy extracted lead pellets from his face that were consistent with buckshot. The corrupt sheriff, who wanted to call it a traffic accident and close the case, claimed they were dental fillings torn loose by the impact

of the crash. Witnesses were afraid to talk and no charges were ever brought.

But more followed: Lamar Smith, William Lewis Moore, Rev. Bruce Klunder, Viola Gregg Liuzzo: Names of ordinary men and women I've never heard of before, martyrs who were targeted for death because of their civil rights activities. Then there was 16 year old John Earl Reese, Willie Brewster, Ben Chester White: Names of people I had never heard of who were random victims of vigilantes determined to halt the movement. Then there are the names we have heard of: James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, Rev. James Reeb, who, in the sacrifice of their own lives, brought a new awareness of the struggle to people all over the world. People who were ordinary, not necessarily expected to achieve greatness, who reveal God to us.

Many hoped Jesus would liberate Israel from the tyranny of the Roman Empire and the corruption of certain religious leaders. Many placed their hopes in Dr. King to liberate America from the tyranny of Jim Crow and the corruption of racist sheriffs – and the blind eye of many others. But neither Jesus nor Dr. King were the end of God's redemptive work in the world, though in the immediate days after their death, that was the fear. In their deaths, God did not stop walking alongside us to liberate the world of tyranny and oppression. All hope had not been lost.

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The two from Emmaus recognized the face of Jesus when he broke bread with them. They ran back to Jerusalem to share their joy in seeing Jesus and to find the place they were needed now in the Body of *Christ* that transcends the limitations of race, gender, and creed. Every road and every meal and every one represents the possibility of a relationship with the Divine; each encounter holds the possibility for a recognition of our place to continue the work of those who were unknown and those who are for us the heroes, like Medgar Evers and Dr. King, who deserve our honor.

In the ordinary, the unexpected, and each other we meet the divine – we experience God's presence. On the journey with a stranger, at a meal between friends, and in the struggle to liberate oppressed peoples...May God be revealed to us.