

The Power of Re-Cognition

A Sermon by the Rev. Karen A. Blomberg
Westminster Presbyterian Church – Alexandria, VA
April 6, 2008
Luke 24:13-32 (The Emmaus story)

It's a picture that invites conversation. Three wooden ladder back chairs. They are empty, in a small semi-circle. They are inviting.

These three chairs represent the symbol of the conference I attended last weekend. The Executive Director of the organization said that she had been carrying these three chairs with her in her travels leading up to the conference which was held in Washington DC. This beautiful picture displayed on the big screen in the conference ballroom depicted these three chairs on the lawn of the White House! How did she manage to get permission to place these chairs in front of the White House? It was a magnificent picture that made us wonder,

Who has sat in those chairs?

Who will sit there next?

*What are the conversations that have taken place
and that will occur?*

Liz Ellman, Executive Director of Spiritual Directors International, let us in on her secret. The chairs, which she had purchased at IKEA, are about nine inches high. She had placed them in the grass, some distance from the White House, got down on the ground, and took the picture. It was an amazing and evocative image.

* * *

Today I am following in the steps of Patrick, who, several weeks ago preached on a footnote. His was a footnote he noticed in the Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version of the Bible - "footnote on a sandal" as I recall. I, too, was drawn to a footnote in my preparation for this sermon. The footnote simply states:

The distinction is between perception and recognition.

Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Footnote on Luke 24:16

This footnote is in reference to verse 16 of our passage this morning,
But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

The distinction, the scholars suggest, is between *perception* and *recognition*.

* * *

The same day that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, the mother of James had found the tomb of Jesus empty, two disciples were on their way to the village of Emmaus. One of them is named Cleopas, the other is unnamed. Jesus joined them on the way.

But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

Why? Did Jesus look so entirely different in his resurrection embodiment?
Were the two disciples so engrossed in their own grief and disillusionment and confusion that they missed seeing who was walking with them?

The distinction is between perception and recognition.

Perception is what we *think* we see. Perception is an impression in the mind of something perceived by the senses. Their eyes were kept from *recognizing* him. Distinct from perception, *recognition* is a knowing. The Greek word is *gnosis*. It is deep knowing. It is “knowing” in the biblical sense, and more. Some of our older English translations of the bible have it right. They translate verse 16,

Their eyes were holden, that they should not know him.

Underline is mine.

(King James Version)

Our word, *recognition*, begins to get at this “knowing” that Luke expresses in our passage. More than a mental exercise – re-cognition is a re-knowing, a rearranging of our inner *cogs* so that something is known again. It is somehow interiorly familiar.

Luke helps us identify several ways that the two disciples are prevented from re-knowing, from re-cognizing, from seeing what and who they needed to see. It has to do with the distinction between perception and recognition.

Perceptions may be born out of assumptions.

- The disciples *assumed* that the women who had been to the tomb earlier that day were overreacting; that they had not seen a vision; that they were confused about their facts regarding the empty tomb. The disciples *perceived* that the women were telling an idle tale (Luke 24:11).
- The disciples *assumed* that Jesus was not only the one to redeem Israel, but that he would do it in the manner *they* thought best. They *perceived* that he had failed because he was captured and crucified (Luke 24:20-21).
- The disciples *assumed* that the stranger on the road was just that – a stranger. They *perceived* that he was the only one around who hadn’t heard about the crucifixion of their teacher and friend (Luke 24:18).

* * *

The stranger, Jesus, and the two disciples continued on their way to Emmaus. Jesus spoke to them about the need for the messiah to suffer; that this was what the prophets had been saying all along, from Moses on. Jesus interpreted to these two the scriptures and things concerning himself. Cleopas and the other disciple invited Jesus to stay with them that night. During supper, Jesus took the bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.... THEN! The flash of *recognition* broke through their *perceptions*.

And their eyes were opened and they recognized him. They knew him.

* * *

What I am left with as I’ve lived with this passage in recent weeks is that Luke invites us to pay attention to *our* assumptions and perceptions.

- Just as the disciples assumed the women were mistaken, how do our assessments block us from knowing and seeing deeply? Just as the disciples were expecting Jesus to save Israel in a particular way and just as the disciples assumed the man with them

was a stranger, how do we inhibit our knowing by what we think we see, and what we think we know?

Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson observes:

We understand today from quantum physics that what is “real” is relative and always involves the interaction with the observer making the observation. Still, the everyday, practical world clings to the prejudices of the old paradigm and persists in thinking that what is real is what we perceive consciously with our puny tools of perception.

Living Your Unlived Life:

Coping with Unrealized Dreams and Fulfilling Your Purpose in the Second Half of Life, Tarcher/Penguin. 2007. p. 215.

Maybe our puny tools of perception lead us to assume that God doesn't speak to us on our way. That whomever we encounter is a stranger. Luke invites us to take seriously every stranger we encounter on the way. It may be Jesus wanting to walk with us for a few minutes of our journey, side by side.

* * *

There's something in this story from Luke I had not noticed before. I had a re-cognition. Just when Jesus blessed and broke the bread, just when the disciples adjusted their cogs, so that they re-cognized Jesus, just as they had this moment of remembering, Jesus vanished from their sight. Gone. Just like that. Why? Why didn't Jesus stay? Couldn't Jesus allow the disciples to savor that time with him? He left them. What is that about?

***Their eyes were opened and they recognized him,
and he vanished from their sight.***

Just as the disciples get it, Jesus leaves.

Maybe Jesus needed to leave. When Jesus left, the disciples re-cogged. They got who it was that was just in their midst. When Jesus left, they were able to let their assumptions and perceptions go, and this is what they were then able to say to each other in his absence:

***Did not our hearts burn within us while
he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?***

Luke 24:32

Luke is telling us that Jesus has to depart. Jesus vanishes so that our hearts will burn within us in a way that our assumptions and perceptions are reduced to ashes. Jesus leaves so that he can come back again, and again, showing up as the stranger on the road, and at our dinner table.

Maybe Jesus leaves so that he can show up again and again,

- as the co-worker who drives us nuts, or
- as the person sitting next to us in the pew.
- Jesus leaves to show up as the person living in our home, or
- as the person who causes us difficulty.
- as the person who brings us the greatest joy.

Jesus leaves so that he can come back and join us in conversation. Jesus departs so that we may re-cognize the presence and the power of the Third.

* * *

Three empty chairs. We are invited to occupy one. To dialogue and relate to another, and to invite the presence of the Third to occupy that third chair.

Who is in the chairs with you?

Who is at table with us?

**God initiates conversation with us in often subtle ways. But always.
The journey to Emmaus isn't satisfying unless the stranger is invited.
The conversation isn't complete without the third.**

**Maybe there are three chairs everywhere we go.
Three chairs in our home.
Three chairs in our church.
Three chairs in our workplace.
Three chairs in the city of Alexandria.
Three chairs on the edge of the White House lawn.**

As you know, there are serious tribal disputes going on in Kenya. The orphanage that Westminster has helped build has evoked a need for three or more chairs. The orphanage in Moi's Bridge houses children from four Kenyan tribes. And they get along! They are in conversation. This conversation has led to another, and another, suggesting that representatives from the seven tribes in the area pull up seven chairs and talk about awarding orphanage scholarships to members of different tribes. The orphanage is a living example of listening, conversing, honoring others, working together. In Kenya, this is happening as a result of your support of this project.

What if we set as an intention to carry with us three chairs – not only in our minds, but in our hearts? Who knows what conversations we may have?

Conversations that lead to discovery of the power of re-cognition of the Other.

**May our eyes be opened,
and may our hearts burn within us
in ways that lead us to recognize and welcome the stranger,
who is among us, always.**

And so it is.