

Message
Saturday April 25, 2009
Luke 24: 28-49
Christ's Emerging Church
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Today, members of the vestry, the staff and heads of the ministry teams met as the Leadership Council. You may remember the Leadership Council from years past. These leaders make responsible decisions about changes, such as our mission statement and staffing changes. So, now it seems it's time for the Leadership Council to gather again; largely because of a cultural shift. This is not a shift just Christ Church is experiencing. Nor is it a shift solely based on economic times. Nor are we talking about the building plans. This is a shift in our culture comes from many things, including the modern technology of cyberspace, wireless internet, instant communication found in texting, cell phones, and an inexhaustible list of social network websites where I lost count at 150. It's safe to say we're emerging into a new way of understanding ourselves in the world and the church will be emerging as well. So, today, we spent two hours just trying to learn a little bit about our new world. We studied some scripture, and shared our thoughts. Mostly, we looked at a video presentation of theologian, scholar and teacher, Phyllis Tickle and her thoughts on what she calls The Great Emergence.

Phyllis is saying that every 500 years, whether we need it or not, the church cleans out its attic, has some sort of a rummage sale. She quotes Bishop Mark Dyer when she says, "that the only way to understand what is currently happening to us as 21st century Christians in North America is first to understand...about every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time,...must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur." (p. 17 *The Great Emergence*)

Bear with me a minute here while I try to explain what she means. Now, 500 years back from our 21st century, around 1517, what we now refer to as the Great Reformation, rocked our world with the birth of Protestantism. Martin Luther nailed his 95 treatises to the door of the church in Wittenberg with the rebel cry, *sola scriptura, scriptura sola*, and the priesthood of all believers. A bit later, the Anglican Communion found its roots through Henry VIII. Alienating himself from the Catholic Church, and in an effort to keep his monarchy in tact, Henry named himself sovereign over the Church of England, which granted divorce and remarriage. This action planted the seed for what we know today as the Episcopal Church of the United States. 500 years before the Reformation, in 1054 the Great Schism, the split of Eastern and Western Churches took place over, how we understand our Trinitarian God, to name just one difference. 500 years prior to the Great Schism we land in the 6th century and the fall of the Roman Empire, or civilization as we know it. The fall of the Roman Empire, as crucial as it was, paled by comparison to its previous reformation of the first century, the birth of our savior, the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Throughout each of these reformations, there is much doubt and question and wonder as to who we are, how we're to be in the world, what it means to be God's people. Each

reforming time is characterized by new ways of communicating, new ways to understanding one another. For instance, The Great Reformation is characterized by Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1440, "the rise of capitalism" the formation of the middle class, the rise of the nation-state as well as the birth of Protestantism. Our shift today is characterized by much and many, including Charles Darwin, and his theory of evolution; Michael Faraday and his field theory; Sigmund Freud and his concept of conscious and unconscious states; along with Carl Jung's idea of collective unconscious; the invention of radio and television over time made our world much smaller; adjusting our relationships with one another; especially with God in Christ.

According to Tickle, each reformation results in one overarching, fundamental question: Where now is our authority? In other words, I would offer, we're asking, *how do we understand ourselves as God's in our changing world?*

It's during this earliest re-forming of thinking of how we understand ourselves as God's, that we hear our lesson today as the two disciples are journeying from Jerusalem to Emmaus. These disciples have just learned the news of the empty tomb. Their world is re-forming right before their eyes and they can't make any sense of it. Could it be that this Jesus, this teacher and healer, this one who sits at the table with sinners and outlaws, this one who promises God's loving, saving grace, is the true Messiah, the anointed one, the one who comes to redeem us and bring us into a new life, an eternal life, with God?

As they walk along, Jesus saddles up along with them on their journey. But, the two disciples fail to recognize him. Too caught up in their existing paradigms of how they know God's salvation, crushed and confused in their grief at the news of Jesus' death and now that he is risen from the tomb, they fail to see the glory of God in their very midst. But, this doesn't deter Jesus. So, he does what Jesus does very well.

He meets us where we are. He walks along, listening to their story, hears their shock and wonder. Then, once again, he shares *his* story, the Easter message, as it is written in scripture. He reminds the disciples that it is necessary that Jesus be "about his father's business" (2:49); that the kingdom of God be made known to all (4:43); that Jesus would go to Jerusalem (13:33); and suffer and die (9:22; 17:25). Jesus is the fulfillment of scripture. Foolish are those who do not believe.

Finally, on the eve of their journey, the disciples invite Jesus to stay with them as they gather for their time of fellowship, with a common meal. Hospitality in Jesus' time is a risk. Strangers are often seen as a threat and are usually ostracized and shunned from the community. Consequently, strangers are also prey to thieves and robbers, or those looking to cause trouble. As a host of strangers, you're considered quite generous because the risk is great. Often, only those leading citizens, those with some authority in the community host strangers. Once a guest is in the host home, the relationship deepens. Hosts provide a meal, lodging and any provisions necessary. Alliances forming a long-term reciprocal agreement seal the relationship. So it is when Jesus, gathered at the table with his new friends, takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to his disciples,

their bond is sealed. Jesus' action is his signature pose given to us first when feeding the 5,000 and again at the last supper. With his words and action, the disciples' eyes are opened. Jesus is recognized. It seems that when we gather for what is most familiar, our shared common meal as a sign of hospitality, that often sacred, holy moments emerge, empowering us and leading us to change.

In the story, *Babette's Feast*, written under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen writes of a French woman who suddenly lands on the doorstep of two spinster sisters in a bleak, dreary, austere Scandinavian fishing village inhabited by a group of austere Lutherans who have renounced all pleasures. The woman, Babette, faithfully and dutifully serves as cook and house keeper for twelve years until one day she receives a letter announcing that she has won the lottery in Paris.

Coincidentally, at the same time the tiny village is preparing for the 100 anniversary of the spinster's father's birth, a great pillar and patriarch of the community, referred to as the Dean. Babette, having never asked anything of the sisters, makes one request. With her winnings, she would like to purchase and prepare the meal for the celebration. And, she wants to travel back to France to buy the delicacies. Reluctant to give Babette permission for such an extravagance, they grant her wish.

Babette travels to France, makes arrangements for the meal and returns to prepare. Over the next weeks, one delicacy after another arrives: crates of tender birds, cases of champagne, fresh vegetables, truffles, pheasants, sea creatures, one gourmet delight after another. Watching the commotion in the kitchen, and having never seen, much less eaten such food, the sisters determine that Babette is cooking up some kind of witch's brew. The sister's explained their predicament to the faithful body of the village and all agreed that they would attend Babette's feast, as to not offend her, but, they would not comment on the meal. On the night of the feast, the villagers gather with the understanding that not one compliment of praise and glory will be offered for fear that all might fall to the sin of such a delight.

Once gathered, the meal begins and the table falls silent as one delectable course after another is served from Babette's gourmet filled kitchen. One sole guest, a general, who years ago courted, unsuccessfully, one of the spinster sisters, and now returning to visit with his aged aunt, sounds out compliments at each new course.

As each dish is served, the villagers sit, stoic, without expression. Babette continues to cook away, and instructs the servers to keep the general's glass filled as he shouts out praise and thanksgiving over her great feast. In time, the special meal takes its effect and while the guests have agreed to say nothing about the meal, their faces and mouths begin to soften under the pleasure. Conversation begins to flow. Shared memories of the bay freezing over one Christmas. One brother, speaks words of reconciliation to another wounded so many years ago. Two women who have not spoken in decades, find conversation. Snippets of laughter and joy burp out of other table members.

Finally the general stands and speaks eloquently, and with great fondness of the Dean, the former patriarch for whom the dinner is offered. "Mercy and truth, have met together," he speaks. "Righteousness and bliss kiss one another." "...here in the midst of the

Dean's simple congregation, it is as if the whole figure of General Loewenhielm, were but a mouthpiece for a message meant to be brought forth."

The story ends with the tiny congregation pushing away from the table, with their many, decades old differences vanished, they gather hands and head outside to stand at the fountain in the town center singing their favorite hymns, strengthen, renewed, and nourished. And while this small congregation does not know what will be in store for them in this war torn time, clearly, this feast at this holy table draws them to trust in divine grace and their eyes are opened.

In the Episcopal Church, at the heart of our worship is Holy Eucharist, the "taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread" and "the taking, blessing, and giving of the wine", as initiated by Jesus and instituted by Jesus as he tells his disciples to remember him every time they gather in his name. We know that Jesus is fully present in this sacred time. This time when we give thanks for the life, death and resurrection. We call this a sacrament. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of God's inward and spiritual grace, freely given to us in Jesus Christ. In other words, this holy meal, is a sign of the invisible made visible, the unseen seen.

This is the Lord's table, and all are invited. Jesus tells us that this meal is "for the anamnesis of me". Anamnesis is remembering what was, what is and what will be. We take this meal, to remember the sacrifice God made for us in giving us his only Son to die on the cross in his love for us, only to bring him to life again so that we would have life made new in him. We take this meal to live out what is now, that Jesus is within us, around us and ever present. We take this meal to imagine the power of Jesus within us yet to come. We take this meal to be forever connected, intertwined with all those who have gone before us, and with Jesus, to know him, intimately, completely, thoroughly. We share in this meal with Jesus to be forever filled with his Spirit, and strengthened to be his people in the world, his church, for whatever re-forming will take place.

We often find our strength from what is most familiar, to give us courage to blaze trails for what is unfamiliar. For the disciples, Jesus was still a wonder. But, in their common meal the unknown became known. Knowing Jesus, nourishes the disciples to be trail blazers. We too are trail blazers. There is much opportunity and challenge in store for how we are to be Jesus' church for the 21st century. For now, we are the emerging church, gathering our strength in one another, in our time of worship, in our prayers, in how we understand scripture, and most especially in this time together, with Jesus, at this most holy table, where he gathers us and fills us with his spirit to not be strangers in the world, but partners in carving the path for a new Christianity.

This is a brave and courageous trail we have in front of us. May we always rejoice and give thanks for how we live as Easter people; for how Jesus trusts in our faithfulness. Once again, we're invited to this sacred meal. Once again, Jesus promises to be our God, our salvation, our victory over death, our life to live. We extend our hands, and give thanks for how Jesus brings us to be his emerging people. Amen.