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Manchester United Methodist Church
April 14, 2002
“Lord of the Dance”
“Lord of the Church”
Acts 2: 14, 36, 41, Luke 24: 13-35

One of the wonderful and occasionally frustrating parts of being in ordained ministry is that clergy are among the last generalists in our society. Almost everyone, it seems, in our society is a specialist. We specialize in some area of business or profession or teaching or whatever it may be. Everyone is a specialist, it seems, except, of course, the clergy, who do a little bit of everything.

Let me illustrate that by sharing with you a little bit about what I did this past Tuesday. My Tuesday began with a breakfast meeting with a member of our congregation who is one of the primary leaders looking at long range planning for our church. Now long range planning is one of those things which is important for any organization and is a whole speciality of its own, but I got to dabble around in that speciality to start my day on that Tuesday.

Tuesday morning is staff meeting around here. If in your work you have staff meetings, I know how much you look forward to them and our staff looks forward always to meeting with me on Tuesday mornings! We spend a good part of Tuesday mornings making sure that we're on the same page and we don't have three meetings taking place in the same room at the same time and all of those hosts of nitty gritty details as well as the more exciting parts of planning for life here in the church. Managing a staff is a speciality, but on Tuesday, I got to dabble around in that.

Tuesday afternoon I went hospital calling. Now there's nothing in the world it seems to be similar about long range planning and hospital calling. They're just different things. There's also nothing in the world that's obviously similar about staff meetings and hospital calling. In fact, making pastoral calls is one of the wonderful things we do and on this particular Tuesday, those calls were very diverse. I had, as it turns out, only two people to visit. One of them was not a part of our congregation, but a friend of a person in our congregation. This call was on a two year old boy and his mother. The little boy has leukemia and is very seriously ill. The second hospital call I made was on someone on the other end of the life span who recently had surgery involving a partial amputation of a limb. Totally different life situations, but pastoral work in the hospital nonetheless.

Late that afternoon on Tuesday I dropped by a funeral home for a visitation where a family was in preparation for a family funeral that we were to have the next day. I wrapped up Tuesday evening attending a meeting with a group of people here in the church that are working on leadership development for lay leadership in the church. That's what I mean when I say clergy are generalists. We do a little bit of a whole lot of things. Also mixed around the edges of those big things on Tuesday was making sure the bulletin was right for this Sunday so it could be printed, spending a little time in Bible study and sermon preparation and personal prayer. I also worked in time to eat!

Clergy are almost the last generalists in our society and honestly it's one of the reasons this calling, this work, is so much fun. But also, as you can imagine, you go through a day like I had on Tuesday and I wish I were more specialized in any one of those many things that I did that day.

Despite all that variety, Tuesday had bookend themes that tied the day together. Both the morning breakfast on planning and the evening meeting on leadership development looked at the future. These meetings were about the direction we're going as a church. They're all about our vision of the future and the destination toward which we are headed. Both meetings asked, "Where does God want us to be as a congregation? Where does God want us to be as individual disciples in Christ?" Those questions are rooted in the gospel lesson that Dean just read for us.

Today's gospel lesson is one of those wonderful Easter stories, though not one that we usually read on Easter Sunday morning. It is a story that St. Luke said took place on Easter Sunday afternoon and evening when two people who had followed, who had been taught by, who had believed in Jesus, met the risen Lord. Two pilgrims were walking from Jerusalem to a nearby village and on this walk occurred the mysterious story of how the risen Christ came and traveled on their journey with them. It is the story about two people for whom Christ changed their direction. Their destination, the place they were going was turned around by the risen Christ. They thought they were going to Emmaus, a village about a day's journey out of Jerusalem. They discovered when they arrived in Emmaus, that they had been traveling with the risen Christ. Emmaus which was to have been their destination was transformed into a temporary stop on a longer journey. It was no longer a destination, but only a way station. Upon arriving they turned around and went back to Jerusalem, to a different destination than they had planned to proclaim to the disciples and the others that they had seen the Lord.

In these weeks after Easter, I'm inviting us to consider that Easter isn't just a nice, schmaltzy holiday where we enjoy lilies and make the sanctuary look good and make everyone feel good and that's the end of it. Easter is an earthquake. Easter is one of those things that makes us and the whole world reconsider our destination and to rediscover where we are going. With Easter we discover that we're not going to the everyday place of Emmaus in our lives, but that we have a Jerusalem to which to go. Easter tells us we are destined for a new Jerusalem, a spiritual Jerusalem. Easter says that's our true destination.

So Tuesday as I worked on long range planning and leadership development underneath both was the bubbling question "What's our destination? What's our vision? What's our new Jerusalem?" Our Jerusalem as individuals and as a congregation, our Jerusalem has to somehow be connected with the risen Christ. We must be an Easter church, an Easter people, a resurrection people, a new Jerusalem people. We are the people, that like the two pilgrims on the road to Emmaus, that have had our lives and our direction and our destination redefined and redirected by the risen Christ.

Now if you want to impress people this week use a \$5.00 word I will give you that will make you sound smart, erudite, educated, way over their heads. Work the word "Christocentric" into your conversation somewhere this week and your listeners will be amazed! "Christocentric." Isn't that a great sounding word? What happened to the two pilgrims on the way to Emmaus is they became Christocentric. They became centered in Christ. The theologians like to use that word, Christocentric. Nobody where you work uses that word at the water cooler, but you can work it in and you'll sound so smart. They don't have to know what it means.

And friends, our mission as a church and our mission as individual disciples of Jesus Christ, our mission is to be like those two pilgrims on the road to Emmaus. We are called to be Christcentric and to have our life's destination be defined by Christ. God calls us to be centered on Christ in such a way that where we're going and what we're becoming is defined, redefined, directed, shaped by Christ. Our experience of Easter, our experience of the risen Lord changes us and makes us centered not on ourselves, but on Christ.

So what does that mean for us as a congregation? What would God like us to do? What would God like us to be like in 10 or 15 years or 20 years? What would this little corner of the kingdom of God, this little piece of the new Jerusalem look like? Well, we all need to have a hand in helping to understand that, but I think our vision must be related to our mission statement. Our mission statement gives us our marching orders and helps us to find our destination. We need to be people of that \$5.00 theological word. We need to be Christocentric people. We need to be a people centered on Christ and our mission statement says that we are people who seek Christ, share Christ and serve Christ.

Research that has been done by our denomination says that people in America feel they have a hole in their soul. People in this country have a hole in their soul and it is not just people out there, that it

is all of us to some degree or another feel that way. In our mission statement we say we are a church that helps people know Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, better and better and better.

Another way to say the same thing is that we need to be a church that helps people grow to be deeply grounded people. We're to be a church that helps people have great depth of Christian experience and commitment. Whether it's in worship or Bible study, prayer groups, whatever it might be, we are to be a place that offers a smorgasbord of occasions where you can deepen your own walk on the road with Christ. We get the hole in our soul filled by becoming Christ centered—Christocentric. I hope that 5 years and 10 years and 20 years from now that we will be a place whose cafeteria of selections to deepen our walk with Christ continues to grow and we continue to deepen who we are. So I ask you, if Easter for you is more than a holiday that smells like lilies, what are the things that you are choosing to seek, to know the risen Christ more profoundly in your life?

The second piece of our mission statement that helps to define, gives us the beginning of the directions of what God wants us to be 5 and 10 and 20 years from now is around that word of sharing Christ. Some churches become so focused on the people in the church becoming more spiritual that they ignore the world. A part of what we're to be is a congregation that keeps reaching out to the world. That has implications for how large we'll be, what our programs will be, what our emphases will be. What would it mean to be a church that is so centered on Christ that we understand that we're to be like those disciples on the road to Emmaus? What did they do when they discovered Christ? What did they do when they figured out that this stranger that was walking with them was indeed the risen Jesus? They went and told somebody. We need to find every way that we can to tell people that the hole in their soul can be healed by knowing God in Jesus Christ. Radio, television, internet, personal contacts, sign out front, newspaper, whatever it takes, we have a job to reach not only deep for us, but broad into the community. As broad and wide as we can reach to be a people for whom that Easter is not just a lily day, but that Easter is that earthquake day that changes everything. Because of Easter, we are changed and the way we look at the world is changed. Sharing Christ with others makes us different and shapes our future.

Finally, we say in our mission statement that what we are to be about serving Christ. You can't really get deep with Jesus without getting your hands messy serving humanity. You can't do it! Piety, spirituality that is pristine and all warm and mushy inside and that never drives us out in love to serve our neighbor isn't of Christ. If we're to be Christocentric, if we're to be centered on Christ, if we're to be shaped by Christ, if our destination is rooted and grounded in Christ, than mission has to be at the very center of our life. Whatever kind of church we are in 5, 10, and 20 years from now, we must be increasingly involved in serving these, the least of these our neighbors.

We have many opportunities already. Anybody that wants to work with children, the homeless, the hungry, anyone that wants to work with youth can do that here. Anyone that wants to go far away can join our youth in a mission project in Mississippi or Pastor Dean building a church in Mexico. There are countless ways to be centered in Christ's mission. I can't tell you all of the details of what it will look like 5 or 10 or 20 years from now, but if we're to be an Easter people, if Easter is to really matter and make a difference other than make us feel "up" one day a year, then we all have to get some of the dirt of the world under our fingernails as we serve the people that really need us.

This whole notion of what it means to be centered in Christ, have our lives defined by Christ, to be like those pilgrims on the road to Emmaus is described most wonderfully by Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer was a person who's own life found its destination turned and changed by the risen Christ. He wrote these words that you've heard before, but keep coming back to me as a part of what we and every Christian community is to be about. To be centered on the risen Christ as Schweitzer says this way: "He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word, 'Follow me', and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, he

will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the suffering which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.”¹

If Easter is to be more than a lily day, Christ must be lord of the church and its destination and its future and its people. May it be so in our lives. Amen.

¹Schweitzer, Albert, Quest for the Historical Jesus