

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Getting to Know Jesus”

(or, “The Seven Mile Conversation”)

Luke 24:13-35

George C. Anderson

In the movie, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Ninny is a resident in a nursing home. She is visited regularly by Evelyn who is in a midlife crisis. Evelyn is not settling well into her empty nest. Her child has left for college and her husband seems to have left her in other ways. On their visits, Ninny tells Evelyn stories about Idgie and Ruth. Though the two are very different women, they meet when they both are at dead ends in life. They open a café together. They face major struggles, but now they face them together.

Through Ninny’s stories, Evelyn gets to know Idgie and Ruth. She cares about them, and then becomes inspired by them. They feel like friends. They certainly become role models for her as she faces her own challenges. Idgie and Ruth change Evelyn’s life. And she never meets them.

At least, that is what happens in the book. When you finish reading the book on which the movie is based, you understand the power of storytelling. People you never meet can change your life. But the movie changes the ending. There comes this moment when Ninny gives Evelyn a look and Evelyn’s expression shows that she realizes that Ninny is actually Idgie. She was telling her own story all along.

I know Marie Blackshaw will agree with me because just two weeks ago we talked about how the book is almost always better than the movie. I was upset by the change. I mean, my own life has been inspired by fictional and historical characters who, through their stories, became so real to me that they influenced my thinking and my living.

That said, I began talking about the movie and not the book because the movie is a better introduction to our passage. There is a difference between learning from, being inspired by, and



being changed by the historical Jesus and having that Evelyn-like epiphany that the living Jesus can actually be your living companion.

Here's the setting for our passage. It is dark. Two people are devastated because the one they were sure was the messiah, the one they followed and learned from, had been executed in Jerusalem in a public and humiliating way. They were there. They saw it. Now they are on a seven-mile walk to their house in Emmaus trying to make sense of the senseless and wondering, "Now what?"

Luke 24:13-35:

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹ He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." ²⁵ Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Some might wonder why I am reading this passage out of season. Why am I reading this passage on the Sunday which is the beginning of our program year?

- Sunday School and midweek classes begin.
 - How about a passage about teaching?



- Children and youth programs are beginning, clubs are being formed.
 - How about a passage about fellowship?
- This is the Sunday we go back to our regular worship schedule of 8:45 and 11:00.
 - How about a passage about worship?

Isn't this an Easter passage?

Well, this passage is like the risen Jesus himself. It won't stay where it is put. And good thing, because I would hope that the Risen Jesus isn't revealed to us only at Easter. All year long we Christians live our lives.

- Hopefully, we read the Bible from time to time and hear stories *about* Jesus.
- Hopefully, we learn and are inspired as Evelyn was by the stories Ninny told her.

The Jesus we learn about is a good role model.

- He taught the Law of Love, a law we would like to keep.
- He taught us about expectations and keeping them, and about forgiveness when we mess up.
- He taught about turning the other cheek and not returning evil for evil,
 - and then showed he wasn't blowing smoke by doing just that when he dealt with those who did not play nice with him.
- With parables, he taught about compassion such as the parables about the Good Samaritan and Lazarus,
 - and then showed us what compassion looks like when he
 - fed the thousands,
 - healed the sick,
 - and included the humiliated in his company.
- And, as I said last week, he somehow kept his head above political waters
 - refusing to be identified with any one party,
 - remaining relaxed when others are anxious,
 - remaining open when others are closed.

We want to be more like that.

Christian fellowship?

Yes, remind me how Jesus made friends and built a community.

Christian education?

Yes, tell me the stories of Jesus.

Christian worship?

Yes, inspire me with music to help me rise above what I have been, and preach sermons explaining how my life can look more like his.



But in and through it all, it is not the “what” of Jesus we long for but the “who.” Our church’s identity statement is “Finding Direction by following Jesus”, not “Finding Direction by following Jesus’ example.” But if what we have learned is true, that the tomb is empty, what we really want is to *know* Jesus. Those two travelers to Emmaus? We “want what they’re having”: a conversation with Jesus himself.

Let’s go back to those travelers. Let’s go through what happens, not so much to learn anything new, but to maybe better understand what this story means for what we are talking about on this first Sunday of the program year.

First: Christian fellowship.

I know “Christian fellowship” sounds churchy, but hang with me. Our story begins with two people who are struggling, disillusioned, and devastated. They are in pain. They are grieving. Perhaps outraged. This seven-mile walk home to Emmaus seems to be leading to a dead end. But at least they are not alone. They have each other on this journey. Sometimes, when you can’t carry yourself, it helps to lift another. If you’ll allow me to ruin Oscar Hammerstein’s lyrics by changing them, “[When you walk through a storm, you don’t want to walk alone.](#)”

As long as they are lifting each other, that is. We need to be careful here, because sometimes it is better to be alone when the other is dragging you down. I bet I don’t have to tell you that. You know how sometimes despair can be joined to despair leading to greater despair. You know how emotions like anger, loneliness, and fear can be manipulated and amplified when joined. If these two travelers had remained alone, who knows what they might have talked themselves into. We can get some kind of idea by seeing the dark side of social media. People who have given up on God and themselves are finding each other all over the web forming mutual support groups leading to darker places.

I’m sorry to talk shop, but I can offer an easy example from my line of work. I did a sabbatical study of what sustains ministers in ministry. It turns out that struggling ministers haring complaints with other struggling ministers usually doesn’t help. Misery inspires misery. No surprise to you, but I don’t seek out those groups and, if I find myself in one, I politely leave as soon as I can.

What helps struggling ministers though is being with other struggling ministers who seek outside counsel—whether it is a hopeful and helpful book they study together, the guidance of a teacher or counselor, or a wise and experienced voice on how to understand where they are and how to find a path to a better place.

Yes, I know, that’s talking shop, but it is not hard to see the parallels in your own experience, is it? Moments come when we wonder “Why?”

- When hope has been lost for a moment,
- when the wrong people seem to be winning,
- and when our best efforts seem to be failing,



doesn't it help when there's someone who maybe can teach us something—even more when someone can remind us what we already know but for that moment forgot, give us some perspective, help see things differently? Yes, so often it is not new information that we need. What we so often cannot give ourselves but what we need from others are those “looking-down-from-above-qualities”:

- perspective,
- understanding,
- hope,
- and maybe a little humor.

That is what this stranger brings to these two travelers. The stranger is the outside voice they need. He brings companionship, but not the kind that makes things worse by hastening the journey down the rabbit hole of despair. His companionship lifts them.

This is Christian fellowship, without their knowing it. This is Church without their knowing it. For what is church, but two or more people gathering together to gain perspective and guidance from Jesus.

And this stranger offers the “looking-down-from-above-qualities” through yet another area we talk about this time of the program year. “Christian Education.”

There I go again. I hear it when I say it. Wouldn't you know that a preacher will bring up existential despair and then say what can help with despair is “Christian Education.” I am reminded of Ralphie in *A Christmas Story*, getting his decoder ring to unlock a riddle on his favorite radio program only to discover that that unlocked message is “[Be sure to drink your Ovaltine.](#)” Add three teaspoons of “[Christian Education](#)” to a cup each of “[Go to church](#),” “[Read your Second Sheet](#),” and “[Pay your pledge](#),” then stir with worship and you've got the formula to cure what ails you.

But I'm not backing down.

- We can't know what we don't learn, after all.
- The worst opinions we have are our uninformed ones.
- Our most dangerous truths are the lies we believe.

Dante has his top seven list of the worst sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride. I haven't come up with my top seven list, but if you asked me to make one today, I certainly would include “Willful ignorance.” And it is usually in service of one of Dante's seven sins, that we remain willfully ignorant. If learning something gets in the way of our greed, we would rather not know.

But happily, willful ignorance is not the problem with the two who are on the road to Emmaus. They are not protective of hearts chilled by anxiety, disillusionment, and fear. They would love to have their hearts warmed by new information—even better, warmed by *a new way of looking at things* because they are in a dark place.



And that is what the stranger does for them. They know their bible already. They know the stories of the Torah, the words of the prophets, the wisdom of the writers. No doubt, they have many psalms memorized because they have sung them in the way we sing Christmas carols. But the stranger helps them to see differently. He walks them back through the scriptures to help them understand why Jesus' death should not cancel out his life. He shows them the narrative threads so that they can see how

- what was expressed in the Torah,
 - what was demanded by the prophets,
 - what was sensed by the poets,
 - what was understood by the Wisdom writers-
- gains clarity in the life, words, and yes, even the death of Jesus.

Again, it is not primarily about information. This is not truth to be found in a formula, under a microscope, or dug up on an archaeology dig. This is not the truth of something being proven. This is the truth of trusting an interpretation. It is trusting a vision that just needs to be true. The proof is in its compelling beauty. The truth is believed not so much because it makes sense, as it *makes sense of you*. Funny, isn't it, that in the end what really matters is not so much what I know but *how I am known*.

Again, this kind of education that speaks of God's grace and love, and the possibility of reconciliation which is revealed even in the death of God's own son, is *about interpretation more than content*. Because, goodness knows, the content of the Bible can be interpreted in pretty horrible ways. I'll use an expression that I've never heard before, but I bet which makes sense to you. There can be a "Google approach to the Bible." You can use the search engine of a corrupted mind to pull up what you need to justify hatred, violence, vengeance and greed. You can justify canceling individuals and people. And if you are good enough at doing this, you can paint a picture of the Bible's messiah where there is no mistaking the resemblance. Jesus *looks just like you*. (That's another sermon, isn't it?: how we make Christ grow into our image instead of our growing into his?).

But the way this stranger talks about the Bible is compelling because it is so full of hope. He speaks to our better angels. What shines through in his interpretation is not the God who justifies the saints, but the God who saves the sinners. With this stranger as a guide, the one who shines through the texts of the Bible is the God of what is real and what is possible—the God of a world where people can be cruel or kind, where strangers will stop for strangers in need and where good people are nailed to wood. This is the God that sees us for all that we are capable of being—the best and the worst of us—and who loves us anyway. With this God in our lives, we can be and do better because this God's love meets us at our very worst. This is the God of the cross, where his son, who is dying and asks that God forgive the world that does this to him.

Some people look at the terrifying vision of Jesus being crucified, and it is so ugly they wonder why anyone would call it good news. But this stranger helps these travelers see how God answers our evil with love. It is the love that is so beautiful.



And then toward the end of our passage, we get to something that happens which is about that other thing we talk about this time of year: Worship.

Yes, there goes the preacher again, telling people to worship. Again, though, I'm not backing down because in our passage, it is in worship where it all comes together. The travelers and the stranger have been in intimate fellowship with each other in trying to deal with the trauma of what happened. They have experienced the best kind of education in that they've gained new understanding and perspective that has warmed their hearts and made them hopeful again. But it is now in worship where their eyes are opened and they realize that Jesus is with them. Jesus has been there all along—in the fellowship and education. But it becomes clear to them in the breaking of bread, which is the sacramental heart of worship. Their eyes are opened, and they see that the stranger who helped them understand the Jesus who was, is Jesus who is now with them.

And there you have it, the “Why” of why we do everything that we are talking about on this Sunday when we talk about fellowship events, classes and going back to regular times of worship.

Christian fellowship isn't just about being with others, as wonderful as that can be. Having friends and family is so great, but it is not having friends and family that saves us. Ask those who have lived long enough to lose just about all the friends and family they have. No, Christian fellowship is about being in fellowship with Jesus, the one who won't leave us, and it is about practicing being with others in the way Jesus is with us.

Christian education isn't just about learning. Being educated is great, but if we live long enough, we'll forget most of what we learn. No, Christian education is about gaining understanding and perspective above all else about what it means have a living God among us. It is to be educated about how better to be with Jesus;

- about what justice looks like in an unjust world,
- what compassion looks like in a world that can be cruel,
- about the ways of reconciliation among people who so easily divide.

It is an education in hope.

And worship isn't about magic incantations and deal-making with God. It is what we do when we know God is among us—even on those Sundays we don't recognize him.

So, I don't back down on fellowship, education and worship—not because they are what saves us. They are means by which those who travel life can recognize a living God among them. Boil it down, and that's what we are about as a church. It is about not remaining ignorant about who is with us. It is about getting to know Jesus who is among us so we can better follow him.

