

Sermon

They Recognized Him

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Today's scriptures are about recognition. About knowing someone for who they are – but it is so much more than that. It is about knowing what they mean to you in your life. To recognize someone in the sense of the scriptures is to see beyond some sort of familiar physical form, but to see more deeply who someone is – our soul recognizes another – almost as if the two had been looking for each other.

I remember when I met Joe, my husband, going through something so strange and so powerful. I had been through a very sad and devastating time in my life after my first marriage ended. My daughters and I had to redefine ourselves as a family and learn to live in a new way. While we stayed in our same house, it had to be declared a new. I remember one of the most profound things I did was I painted my front door purple. I had wanted to do that since I moved in but was unable to. So once I did that, for me it was redefined as our new home, for us girls.

Joe and I started dating and I recall on our first date, as we strolled along the Niagara River, I looked into his eyes and I found something familiar there. It was puzzling to me at first...I would gaze at him and my soul seemed to know something that I yet did not. As Joe and I got to know each other and I

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understood his values and love of God and family, I came to understand that this chubby, bearded never before married single man was someone my heart was looking for and I recognized him in that moment. All the confusion and pain of the previous years seemed to evaporate for a moment and I could see clearly for the first time in a very long time.

As I read our passage in Luke, it made me think back to that first date...two of the disciples are walking and along comes Jesus who begins to walk with them. They are consumed with what has happened over the previous days. The arrest, the betrayal, the crucifixion and now Jesus is alive again. They converse about the dramatic events that have taken place. As the story, unfolds, they will, in effect, give a summary of Jesus' mission and the story of his passion, but without full understanding. I wonder – was Jesus so altered in his new body that he was unrecognizable. In other accounts, they do recognize Jesus but it always seems a bit delayed – so it makes me think he was a bit altered. Or, perhaps it was their ability to see that was altered – they are in such despair “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” – Oh how I know how great disappointment can lead to an altered perspective. In any case, Jesus does an incredible thing. He patiently walks with them and allows them to tell him who he is and what this basically means to them. And then, instead of saying – “Guys, its me – can’t you tell that it’s me! I’m standing in front of you – it’s all true!” No, like a true Rabbi and teacher – he preaches scripture and what is so beautiful about that is it is through scripture that the disciples come to know who he is. But first, they encourage him to linger there with him because it is night and then together they

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share a eucharistic meal. Jesus takes bread, blesses it and breaks it to share...and through the sacrament their eyes are open. The masquerade is over, the sacred memory of the heart is rekindled, the wellspring of hope bubbles and gurgles again – just like it did for that woman who thought she would never find love again – that she would never be able to trust enough again to allow her heart to feel that love and hope.

Our passage from Acts begins on the day of Pentecost, after a diverse crowd of amazed spectators has gathered around the apostles. The apostles themselves have experienced something like a violent rush of wind, and a phenomenon that Luke describes as something like divided tongues or tongues of fire that has appeared to them and rested upon them where all heard the words Peter spoke in their own languages.

The power within this message that those of different beliefs, different backgrounds, different levels of responsibility within this story for the issues negatively affecting this community in this message and in this moment are united by one message of faith – one belief of faith – and somehow hearing it within their own way of understanding.

I wonder how this might apply to us today? Can the message of God's redeeming love through the resurrection and with the power of the Holy Spirit lead people to be baptized and to declare themselves believers? In our scripture 3,000 came forward and decreed witness to this message. While Peter does use some language that indicts the listeners for what has happened to Jesus, that is

tremendous power in their inclusion – this is not a story of condemnation but of invitation. It is hard for us to imagine today as Christians that at our birth we and the Jewish nation were not separate strands of faith but rather a story of spiritual quest and great diversity. Two beliefs with shared scripture and tradition as we remain today. Finding Jesus in ourselves, in our community and in each other is finding true unity and peace.

I'd like to share something that was shared with me from Rabbi Ellen Frank who adapted this from Rabbi Steven Moss.

Let us Build a Sukkat Shalom, a Canopy of Peace

In their Friday evening service, they ask god to spread over them the Sukkat Shalom, the canopy of peace. But we must work in partnership with God to build it. This canopy of peace is fragile, but it must be built in order to preserve humankind.

Peace, shalom, as an ideal to strive for is presented to us by God, but it is all of us together who must work to make peace a reality. Whether it is peace within us, our community, our nation, or our world and even when we achieve a state of peace, we do know, those of us who have been blessed to experience it, that it is so very fragile, just like the peace treaties signed between nations.

The Sukkat Shalom takes time and effort to build and is made up of extremely specific items.

They are:

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1. Respect. We need to respect the other with whom we are making peace even when we might disagree with that person.
2. Courage. We need to have the courage to move outside that comfort zone and make that move that reaches out and touches that person.
3. Strength. We need strength to be ready to take bold actions that might shake oneself up or shake the other person up, but this is what is called for.
4. Perseverance. We need to be ready to go that extra mile, make that extra step, to show that we are sincere.

Violence, hatred, racism, distrust that surround us these days should never prevent us from walking in the footsteps of Aaron, the pursuer of peace, and trying with respect, courage, strength and perseverance to build the Sukkot Shalom, the canopies of peace everywhere and in every community that we can.

We need to understand that the Sukkat Shalom will be achieved in our families, in our communities, and in our nation when we welcome all people into our lives. Finally, the great Sukkat Shalom will be achieved when all humanity is brought together under a great canopy of respect and appreciation for all.

When we can achieve this, in any way each of us can, then there will be true peace, shalom, salaam, for all. Then the words of Isaiah will be fulfilled: “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people,” and “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” (Or to modernize this last thought – the guns will be

melted down and turned into implements for community gardens.) May these prophetic words be fulfilled in our lifetime.

As we read scripture, as we see God in each other, and as we bring peace to world so prone to conflict – it is in those moments when our soul sees another soul and knows – I recognize you – my brother. I recognize you, my sister.

And let us say: “Amen!”