

## Message: "Paying Attention to Spiritual Hunches"

### Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:13-35

<sup>13</sup>Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup>While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup>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?" <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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." <sup>25</sup>Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup>Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. <sup>28</sup>As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>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?" <sup>33</sup>That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup>They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" <sup>35</sup>Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Many years ago, I had an experience that had some parallels with what is going on in our scripture lesson today. I was at the grocery store, getting some items for home; I was staring in the grocery refrigerator section, looking for milk or sour cream (or maybe one of those rolls of cookie dough you're supposed to cook but usually eat raw by the spoonful, not that I've ever done that!). While

standing there, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a woman staring at me. She was staring in such a way that it was apparent she was trying not to be rude or even noticed -- but I sure noticed! Her stare was intense. Well, I did what comes natural to anyone when they sense someone is staring at them - I checked to make sure my shirt wasn't on backwards, or that I had a pair of matching shoes on, or that I didn't have any lettuce sticking in my teeth. No, everything seemed OK, but this woman kept looking at me, very intently. I turned to meet her gaze, whereupon she quickly turned away and disappeared behind another aisle.

"Weird," I thought, and continued shopping. But as I moved from the refrigerator section to the canned goods aisle, I caught sight of her hovering around the corner of the aisle, again trying not to be seen. Her eyes were really wide, and she quickly retreated again once she saw that I saw her. Now I was getting concerned - do I really look that strange? Had I sat in some wet paint somewhere? Did I have a wardrobe malfunction I was totally unaware of? My shopping experience was on edge from that point on.

Finally, around the section where one finds pasta, I saw her again, but this time she was very tentatively approaching me, and knew that I had seen her. I'll never forget her face, anxious and nervous, as she came up to me and said, "Mark?" Instantly, I realized what was going on; she had mistaken me for someone else. Now, I need to explain something to you -- in Lewistown, Montana, where I served as pastor for eight years, I learned in my first year that I had two twins in town, two other gentlemen who were very close to my age and looked just like me - just as handsome, just as perfectly coifed, just as intelligent-looking as I (I know - hard to believe, right?). Over time, I met both of those men, and must admit, they really did look quite like me, or I looked very much like them.....I know, those poor guys! In any event, this woman thought I was one of my twins, a man named Mark, and was absolutely stunned to see me walking around in the grocery store. This might seem like a really strange reaction until I let you know that Mark had died a few months before in a very tragic, unexpected accident; he left behind a wife and two young children; he was very involved in their lives and very involved in the community; his death shocked us all. And here was obviously a friend, or at least someone who knew Mark, thinking that her dead friend was walking around the grocery store.

It was an experience that confirmed the reality expressed in the scripture lesson today, that we all are creatures of imperfect vision, or more to the point - we sometimes have difficulty comprehending what we see. This can be for a host

of reasons of course, such as confusing one person for another or falling victim to our assumptions about reality's interpretation, but the bottom line is, we sometimes get things wrong perceptively.

Take the disciples on the road to Emmaus in our scripture passage today. It is so very important to immerse ourselves in their state of mind and heart, where they were still reeling from the death of Jesus. They must have been in a form of heartfelt agony over the events of the past week; their wounds of sorrow were still very fresh. Jesus, their friend and master, one who somehow embodied God on earth, having entered Jerusalem in glory just a week ago, was arrested, imprisoned, tried, tortured, mocked, abandoned, scourged, condemned, and finally crucified as a criminal. None of it made any sense; their mourning was compounded by a profound disconnect between what had happened and Jesus's messaging of eternal life, of continual presence among them, of not leaving them desolate, of staying with them forever. But he was gone; and that was it. Those two disciples were not alone on that road to Emmaus; they had traveling with them in their minds and hearts a host of troubled thoughts and despondent ideas.

And then, they come into contact with a stranger. At least, they assume it is a stranger; entering their mind frames of grief and confusion, it is certainly a safe bet the last person they would guess it could be was Jesus. It is no wonder they did not recognize him as their minds were so preoccupied with what had come to pass.

Let me stop there for a moment, and ask you all a personal question - have you ever been there? It's a very dark place I'm speaking about, when things have gone terribly wrong, when hope is absent, when cornered by harsh reality with no possibility of escape. Times when an unexpected death took someone we loved; times when the plans for life went precisely the wrong way; times when innocence suffered without any rhyme or reason; times when something life-giving was taken away? I think all of us have faced such times and felt the accompanying disorientation of life gone askew; it's not only hard to make sense of what is going on within us, but what's going on around us. Such times temper the effectiveness of our sight, our understanding, our perception; everything looks dark when looking through opaque experiences.

But I would hazard a guess, seeing that you are here today, that you survived, that you somehow made it through those opaque experiences, that your perception changed a bit, perhaps even a lot. I would guess that eventually you somehow experienced something or someone who saw you through, or little by

little felt a seed of hope and possibility start to sprout. Something nudged you beyond the confines of the trauma; something moved you beyond its absolute control. I find this a helpful way to think about how the spirit of God works, which finds support in our scripture passage. As the two disciples were walking with the stranger, who was in fact Jesus, they marveled at his learning as he interpreted scripture to them; perhaps this was the nudging of growing clarity regarding the stranger? Eventually, their familiarity with this stranger had grown in that they pleaded with him to stay and eat with them; such pleading is saying something as well, I believe, in that their recognition that this was someone of significance was growing. Then, when the table was prepared and the bread broken and shared, the scriptures say it was "<sup>31</sup>Then that their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>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?" What an apt way to describe a nudge! Something, somehow, someway, was telling them - burning in their hearts - throughout this whole time that a significant thing was happening that even their despair could not blind them to. God was not through with them; God was not through with the world. And it took some time and experience - some nudging of the spirit of God - to get them to the point where they could embrace a reality beyond their assumptions.

The Spirit of God nudges us beyond our assumptions - what a way to understand what it means when we say "the movement of the Spirit." Perhaps that's the most helpful aspect of this account on the road to Emmaus that can work in our lives if we allow it access - the thought that our God is a God of constant nudging beyond assumed reality. Such nudging may be somewhat uncomfortable for we humans who like things concrete, explainable, scientific, and obvious. But look where such living gets us - a world which often seems bent on self-destruction. No, the ways of humanity leave much to be desired, but the desiring is not without its response for those who can trust beyond themselves and accept a spiritual reality greater than themselves. One must be open to the mysterious, however. God will not be pinned down, especially by us. The ways in which the spirit of God work may very well be mysterious, but they need not be misunderstood in terms of their affect upon our lives, nor should they be discounted in favor of a world trusting only in ourselves. We need cues from beyond ourselves to make sense of our world. We need reminders and

touchstones to awaken what lies dormant in our brains and our hearts due to lack of use or suppression due to trauma. We need spiritual nudging.

As a constant stream of water will eventually wear away the strongest stone, a constant nudging of the spirit will eventually wear away all blindness of heart and mind - but we must allow its flow in our lives, we must invite the possibilities of God to outweigh the despair of worldly things. We would be wise to pay attention to what burns inside of our hearts; for it is there that God is most likely trying to get our attention.