

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 26, 2020

ACTS 2:14A, 36-41 | PSALM 116:1-4, 12-19 | 1 PETER 1:17-23 | LUKE 24:13-35

A sermon about the Road to Emmaus practically writes itself. *The disciples on the road think Jesus is gone forever. But then when they meet at table, Jesus is made known in the breaking of the bread. And if we're honest, we probably feel like the disciples who think God has abandoned us. But when we gather around the table in just a few minutes, Jesus will be present there, too.* Sprinkle in a few jokes, and you've got the whole thing done. But that sermon only works if you have communion.

Most ELCA churches have not celebrated the Eucharist since we can't be together in person. But different churches have handled it differently. Our Catholic friends down the street at St. Elizabeth's have continued celebrating daily masses that you can watch on livestream. Some of our Reformed and Presbyterian colleagues celebrate home communion where you have your own bread and wine at home. The pastor says the magic words over the screen and you're all set.

The question of whether you should or shouldn't celebrate the Eucharist is less interesting to me than what our inability to gather together has made evident about the sacrament. So today, I want to use the story of the road to Emmaus to help us think a little bit about our own understanding of the Eucharist.

As usual, it helps to start by asking where Jesus shows up in the story. The obvious answer is that Jesus shows up in the breaking of the bread when the disciples recognize him. Luke writes, "When [Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then [the disciples'] eyes were opened, and they recognized him."

But that's only half right. Because Jesus meets them before that, too. Luke writes, "While [the disciples] were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." The narrator knows that the man the disciples encounter is Jesus. But from the disciples' perspective, that's not true. From their perspective, when they first encounter him, Jesus is a stranger.

That's an image that we shouldn't rush past to get to the "Jesus shows up in the breaking of the bread" part. Jesus meets us as a stranger. Someone who isn't completely known or comprehensible to us. It's as if, when we meet Jesus, there's something out of our control. Something about this person that we can't quite explain. That remains beyond our grasp.

And that image of Christ the stranger takes on a deeper meaning when we think about the Eucharist. What's most telling about the arguments surrounding virtual communion is how much they center around bread and wine, the tactile elements that we use in the sacrament. What usually gets left out is *you*. The assembly of people gathered. An assembly that includes friends and family and acquaintances. But also, an assembly that includes strangers. People we don't know. And not simply people we don't know. But people who sometimes act in ways that can be unorthodox, who have experiences that are foreign to us, who have expectations that we might not share. It is a meal where we take not just bread and wine with words of blessing for us as individuals but an event where we receive the presence of others, particularly those strangers, as a gift.

In other words, the celebration of communion is an inherently public act that occurs in a public space. Even when we take communion to people who are sick, it is taken from that assembly. It's almost like an echo or a ripple. So the Eucharist is not just a time when we consume magical bread and wine. It's an event where we are grafted together who have been, up until now, strangers to us.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

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In her book *Trick Mirror*, the cultural critic Jia Tolentino suggests that what makes a public space public is that you can be in it without being expected to buy something. In other words, public spaces are spaces where you can just be. Where you don't have to explain yourself. Where you don't have to give a reason for being there. Where you don't have to buy anything.

Churches are, by their very nature, public spaces. If someone wants to join worship or Bible study or just sit in the sanctuary and pray, we don't charge them or even ask for an explanation of why they need to do that here. Our space is your space. That's one reason why seeing old churches converted into parks or libraries or affordable housing or even houses of worship for other faiths feels kind of intriguing, but seeing old churches converted into luxury condos just feels kind of gross. Because it means there's one fewer place that we can be without having to justify our presence.

One of the effects of this pandemic that has strained our civic health is the loss so many of our public spaces. No churches. No libraries. No community centers. In particular, I've been thinking about our friends at St. Matthew Trinity Lunchtime Ministry in Hoboken. Because of the pandemic, meeting in the church basement is impossible, so they have switched to pre-made meals that they can hand out for takeaway. To state the obvious, this is good and important. But it also means that there is one fewer space in the city where people can be without having to justify their right to be there. When you lose a public space, you can still get people something to eat. But it's much harder to get people fed.

We have tried to maintain some sense of community over the past weeks by gathering in virtual spaces. And those virtual spaces work well enough for many things: presentations and editing documents and even happy hour. But they are not public spaces in the same way that our church building is. Most obviously they are not public in that lots of people can't access them. But there's also something more subtle. Which is that they give us the illusion that we are in control. If there's someone we don't like, we can block them. If there's someone we disagree with, we can mute them. We can even put a password on our worship to make sure no one comes in that we haven't vetted. You can sort of construct your own reality where there are no surprises, no disagreements, and no strangers.

But there's something lost there, too. When we're in church there are people we don't know. There are people who might be here for a different reason than us. There are people who might have different expectations. There are we get along with well and people we wish would just go away and find a different church. And we're sure there are people who feel the same way about us. But when we gather at Christ's table, those people are part of the body of Christ that I receive. The sharp edges of other people's lives that we find so uncomfortable are transfigured into the conduits of God's mercy.

So perhaps instead of thinking of this time as lacking Christ's presence through the sacraments, we should think of this time as a fast. Something both forced on us by the circumstances but also something that we are intentionally choosing to do. Perhaps we shouldn't gather around Christ's table again until St. Matthew Trinity Lunchtime Ministry opens up its dining room again. To help us appreciate the weight borne by the most vulnerable. To clarify that we are guests and not host at Christ's meal. And, most of all, to remind us of the gift of strangers.

Because we can't receive the gifts of communion until we can be greeted by the one who walks the road with us. Who makes the familiar, ordinary bread and wine, strange. And who makes the strange, the unknown and incomprehensible, familiar.

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