

April 11, 2010
Luke 24:13-35
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Right in Front of Us

In the late 1970s, when Ron and I first moved to New Jersey, I worked for New Jersey Bell in downtown Newark. I commuted by train each day. It was my first real experience with people living on the streets and with street performers. I realized that after a while they all became part of the background, along with the streets and buildings. The flow of workers commuting in and out of the city paid little attention to the city itself.

I was reminded of my experience when I came across this story. The setting is the Washington, DC metro station on a cold January morning in 2007. A man with a violin played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes, during which time roughly 1,000 people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. After 3 minutes a middle-aged man stopped for a few seconds. At 4 minutes the musician received his first donation. Without stopping, a woman dropped a dollar in his hat. At 10 minutes a 3-year-old boy stopped, but his mother tugged him along. Several other children tried to stop, but their parents hurried them along. Seven people stopped briefly. About 27 gave money, but continued along at their usual pace. One person, who had played the violin in his youth, stopped for 9 minutes but stood at a distance. As he said later he was puzzled by the dissonance of context – the subway station and this extraordinary music. One woman right near the end

recognized who it was and listened until he finished. Not counting her \$20 bill, the man collected a total of \$32.17. When he finished playing there was only silence. No applause.

The violinist was Joshua Bell, a world renowned musician. The Stradivarius violin he was playing is worth 3.5 million dollars. Two days before he had sold out a theater in Boston where the seats averaged \$100 a piece. This incognito appearance was organized by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and people's priorities. The experiment was designed to reflect on questions of beauty and context. In a common place environment at an inappropriate hour do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we recognize talent in an unexpected context?

As the Washington Post reporters queried: If we can't take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that -- then what else are we missing? (www.washingtonpost.com "Pearls Before Breakfast.")

*What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stop and stare.*

From "Leisure" by W. H. Davies, Welsh poet.

The challenges of a surging pace may be particular to our modern life, but the dissonance of unexpected context is not new. When I was a high school teacher and I would meet a student outside of the classroom, my mind would think third period, second row, fourth seat, "Oh, hi Sam." When something/someone is out of context are we able to see what is right in front of us.

Cleopas and his companion were on the road to Emmaus, likely on their way home. They are reeling from all that has happened in the last week. Just this day word has spread like wildfire that some of the women, upon going to the tomb, found the body gone and were told by angels that he was risen. Others had gone to check. Indeed the body was gone, but they did not see him. What to make of all this? The two on the road didn't hang around Jerusalem to see what happened. Maybe they needed to get home to familiar surroundings to try to clear their heads.

Have you every thought how much easier it would be to be a believer if we could have been there? Yet, when we look closely at the biblical stories, it wasn't easy for them either. In the gospel of John, Mary doesn't recognize Jesus until he speaks her name. In the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus appears to the disciples in Galilee, it says, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." And here, on the road to Emmaus, the two do not recognize Jesus when he joins them. Even though he is right in front of them, they miss it, in the beginning.

Throughout this Emmaus Road story we experience the tension between seeing/not seeing, open/closed, knowing/not knowing. First the disciple's eyes are kept from recognizing Jesus. Then as they tell him about the events in Jerusalem, they ironically comment that those who went looking for the risen Jesus did not see him, all the while that he is right in front of them. They are closed to the fullness of who this is. As they walk together he opens the scripture to them. In the end, their eyes are opened, as he is made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The word used for "open" here is pivotal. It is not the usual word for opening eyes. It is the same root word that is used to describe opening the scriptures. It is a more complex Greek word and means it is revealed to them.

How often do you suppose Christ is right in front of us and we rush by the encounter?

One of the key factors in the process of revelation for the two on the road is their simple kindness and openness to the stranger, even though their eyes are not yet fully open. In their own grief and disorientation, they might have pushed this traveler away. Yet, they are open to his traveling with them and talking with them. When they arrive in Emmaus, they invite him to "stay with us."

Through their openness to this unknown companion, their hearts are warmed and their eyes fully opened. In offering bread to the traveler, the Bread of Life is offered to them. Christ is made

known to them, and then immediately vanishes. In the twinkling of an eye, they fully see and then he's gone. God's presence is always elusive, transitory, dancing on the edge of awareness. It is in looking back that the fullness of the encounter settles into their perceptions.

Our days are full of chance encounters and unexpected sightings. Who knows what beauty, what grace is waiting right in front of us?

Maybe to those on the road to Emmaus it seemed like just a crumb to invite a fellow traveler in for bread. Ah, but paying attention to the crumbs, the small kindnesses in life may reveal so much more.

Gunilla Norris in her book *Becoming Bread*, (pg. 71) put it this way.

Crumbs

*Be careful with the crumbs.
Do not overlook them.*

*Be careful with the crumbs:
The little chances to love,*

*the tiny gestures, the morsels
that feed, the minims.*

*Take care of the crumbs:
a look, a laugh, a smile,*

a teardrop, an open hand. Take care of the crumbs. They are food also.

*Do not let them fall.
Gather them. Cherish them.*