

April 29, 2018
Life Together in Christ (8): **Discerning the Presence of Christ**
Luke 24:29-32
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Have you ever had a conversation that felt so good you didn't want it to end? It might be the first date with the person who later became your husband or wife. It might be a time at a coffee shop with a new friend. It might be a time with the small group members around the dinner table. As you had a good conversation and a good time, it was getting late and finally it was time to say "good bye."

If you had an experience like that, you know exactly what the disciples on the road to Emmaus felt as they approached the exit to their village and it was time to part ways. The conversation they had been having with Jesus was so wonderful and amazing, that they did not want it to end. They longed for more to share how they really felt. They hungered for the kind of deep listening Jesus was so skilled at. Even though the conversation with Jesus had been challenging, they wanted more of Jesus' paradigm-shifting perspective.

As it was getting dark and it would have been dangerous to be out on the road, "*they urged him strongly to stay.*" (29) Jesus gave in to their friendly persuasion. That's when things really started to get interesting! The word 'stay' is used twice in today's text. The discipline of staying together is quite significant to the outcome of this story. At the beginning, the two disciples chose to stay with each other and walk together. It opened them to the presence of Christ. All three companions chose to stay together. It opened up all sorts of possibilities for further encounter, deeper levels of recognition and true discernment.

We live in a global society that is so transit, hardly anyone stays anywhere for very long. People routinely leave family and friends behind in order to follow a job. Couples choose not to stay married when the going gets tough. Congregants leave their churches when they disagree with one another or with the pastor or a new, better version of church gets started across town.

One of our challenges in faith life is our inability to stay together. Stability is one aspect of true discipleship. In Jewish culture, sharing a meal had special significance because meals were a time of solidarity and fellowship. Jesus' choice to stay and share a meal with these disciples was an expression of his desire to renew fellowship with them after all they had been through. Whether they realized it or not, this meal was the fulfillment of the statement that the kingdom of God has come in Christ!

Even though the disciples had invited Jesus into their home as their guest, by the time they sat down for dinner, Jesus was acting more like the host! He was the one who picked up the bread,

blessed it, broke it and served it. This is something the host would typically have done as an act of welcome and hospitality. The shift Jesus made from being the guest to being the host represents a significant turning point on the road between the now and the not yet. It is the shift from the illusion that we are in control of our relationship with Christ and our spiritual journey to an absolute awareness that Jesus is the one guiding, controlling and sustaining our journey.

As the disciples received the bread from his hand, they were receiving him back into their lives as Lord and Savior. At that precise moment their eyes were opened and they were finally able to recognize Jesus for who he was. If they had not stayed together, they would have missed the culminating moments of the whole journey!

This Emmaus story tells us that in the ordinary moments of our lives, Jesus is simply delighted to show up and join right in. As we become more practiced at recognizing him in the midst of our tough lives and in preparing food and sharing a meal together, we ourselves are transformed and deeply changed. Learning to recognize the presence of Christ in all of life is also called discernment. Discernment is a mark of Christian maturity all of us need to cultivate (Romans 12:2; 1 John 4:1). It is a spiritual gift. Discernment can also be defined as the ability to recognize where God is at work so that we can join God in it. Discernment is a spiritual practice we can engage in both personally and corporately when we want to know the will of God regarding a specific decision we are facing.

Finally, "*their eyes were opened, and they recognized him*" (24:31). But right after their eyes were opened and they recognized him, Jesus promptly disappeared! Jesus wanted them to know he was alive, but he also wanted them to learn to relate to him in a new way. Rather than knowing him as an earthly friend and teacher, he wanted them to engage him on a spiritual level. Rather than clinging to past experiences of physical presence, they would need to cultivate faith that goes beyond sight.

Even though Jesus' disappearance must have left the disciples with a deep sense of loss and emptiness, they gained something very important. They now had this experience of their hearts burning within them as Jesus accompanied them on their journey. They now would always be able to recognize it. They were learning how to know Jesus not just by his physical presence, but by the impact his presence had on their hearts. As the disciples had communion with Jesus on the road and around the table, we need to have communion with Jesus on our journey of life and around the table when we take his body and his cup during communion in the sanctuary and when we share our meal in the fellowship hall after church or at our dining table. As our eyes are opened and we recognize Jesus in our lives and around the table, our lives will never be the same.