

“Opening Our Eyes to God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 24: 13-35

What does it feel like to lose? Ask the Cleveland Indians after Game 7 of last year’s World Series. Ask any politician who has to concede on election night. Ask the Indianapolis Colts every time they seem to play the Pittsburgh Steelers. (I knew Gary Shaw and Pam Whitehouse would appreciate that reference!)

We most often associate losing with sports, with competitions, and with elections. The scoreboard at the end of the game shows who is the winner and who is the loser. The final votes tallied indicate who will serve in elected office and who will not. A judge’s sheet determines who receives first prize in a school competition, and who gets the consolation prize.

But losing can also take on different forms besides athletics or competitions. It can be present when you are sitting in the doctor’s office, and you hear that your loved one’s cancer has spread. It can be present when a beloved family member is torn apart by anxiety and stress, and you feel helpless due to being so far away. It can be present when a couple, after months and years of trying, are told that the adoption will not happen after all. It can be present when once more, that promotion you had been expecting is given to someone else.

Jeffrey Gallagher writes: *This is where Cleopas and his companion find themselves. They’ve lost. They’re defeated. They poured their whole lives and selves into following this man they know was the savior. They gave up everything to follow him. Then he died – defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory. The one who was supposed to deliver them all couldn’t even deliver himself from the cross.*

This isn’t how the story was supposed to end. Remember the waving palms? What about the victory and celebrating and God’s kingdom coming to earth? All of it gone.

Now they find themselves walking down a road to Emmaus. It’s likely not even an actual, physical place. Frederick Buechner quips that Emmaus is the place where “we throw up our hands and say, ‘Let the whole damned thing go to hang. It makes no difference anyway.’” It’s the place of desolation. It’s the young mother holding her stillborn baby in her arms, walking around the delivery room, with no idea where to go or what to do (Jeffrey Gallagher, *The Christian Century*, April 12, 2017: 20).

We all have our Emmaus roads. We all have those times, seasons, moments in life that we feel lost or confused. They are those journeys of life where we are walking along the path, overwhelmed by whatever

has consumed us, and we are unable to open our eyes and see who it is that is walking alongside us.

Perhaps you are caring for an elderly parent. You are juggling doctor's appointments and in-home nursing and rehabilitation schedules and day-to-day living needs for your loved one. You are the advocate, the one who is speaking up for your mother or father, to be sure the best care is being provided them. But you are exhausted. You are spending less and less time with your own family or friends. Your priority for caring for your parent has given you tunnel-vision, and you are unable to hear the words of encouragement or offers of assistance from your spouse, your coworkers, your neighbors. You feel lost amid the daily and hourly demands this brings, and you are not sure how you will find your way along the journey ahead.

Or perhaps you are doing your best at your job, but it's just not your passion anymore. You go into work, take care of the tasks that are in front of you, and clock out at the end of the day. But mentally, you clocked-out a long time ago. You feel obligated to provide the means for your family to eat, to have shelter, to have the necessities of life. But you feel trapped. You feel lost amid the obligations of life, and that prevents you from hearing about new opportunities. Someone mentions a new venture, but you feel it's too risky. Another asks you about moving to a new location, but you feel it's overwhelming to consider relocation. You're not sure how you are going to navigate the journey that is in front of you.

The power of the Road to Emmaus is that God is always there, even when we don't realize it at first. Cleopas and his companion are walking, feeling lost, and God comes. God in Jesus Christ comes alongside them and invites them to tell their story, to share what is on their hearts. They may not have known it at the time, but God was there. Only later could they see and trust and believe that their God did not abandon them.

We may not be able to see God in the midst of our Emmaus journeys at that moment, but God is nevertheless there. In those friends or family asking us how we are doing in our care-giving, we are given a space to share our struggle and be affirmed for the love we are showing our family member. In those colleagues who are suggesting new ways of living out our vocation, we are reminded that we have many gifts to offer to better this world in which we live. Our eyes might not be open to God at those moments, but God is there. God is always there.

So, what eventually opens our eyes? What eventually opens the disciples' eyes? Gallagher continues:

By now it's gotten late. So they offer Jesus a place to lay his head for the night - not because it's Jesus, but because it's the hospitable thing to do. They sit down to a meal together, and their guest takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them.

Takes, blesses, breaks, gives – how many times have they seen him do that before? Around the table, surely. But when else? When he took a young child to his knee, blessed her, broke through the disease that held her captive, and then gave her back to her parents newly healed? When he went into the temple and approached the money changer's stand? Maybe he said a prayer before breaking it down and then handing it, in pieces, back to the money changer, saying that he would do this and more in the days to come? They probably didn't understand what he was doing then, either. But they saw him take, bless, break, and give; they have seen this pattern before.

They must have, because in this moment their eyes are opened. It isn't when he comes near them; it isn't when he walks with them; it isn't when he tries to explain it all to them. It is when he takes, blesses, breaks, and gives them bread – something so ordinary that they have seen it before, time and time again.

It's only then that the tears give way, their heads look up from the table, and they finally see who has been journeying with them. Jesus is alive after all! The tomb, the angels, the women – can it really be true? It is all coming back to them now – they see. And then, in an instant, they see no more. He is gone.

Is this not the way God so often enters our lives? Not in the miraculous, but in ordinary taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. In the hug of a friend we haven't seen in a while, in the laughter of a child frolicking in the grass that has finally surfaced from beneath the snow, in breaking a trail through the woods, in giving to the food pantry, in blessing an evening meal: we recognize God.

With our eyes opened in the midst of this everyday reality, we are reminded that all is not lost. We are not defeated or alone. Love has won; Easter is here to stay. We see, and we begin to understand – and in that instant, Emmaus is gone (ibid).

God breaks in along our Emmaus roads and opens our eyes to Emmanuel, God With Us. It might be a song we sing in worship, when we hear God's comfort and peace. It might be in the celebration of the sacraments, these visible signs of God's abiding grace, when we touch and taste and remember God's claim on our lives. It might be in a holy conversation with a stranger, when we recognize, as Cleopas and his friend saw, that God is present in the most unexpected circumstances.

And when God opens our eyes in such ways, we are then able to be a companion to others on their Emmaus roads. For when our hearts burn within us with the love God has shown for us, we are able to go and tell others that the Lord has risen indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.