

Disciples at Second Hand

Easter Sunday

Text: Luke 24:30-31

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Soren Kierkegaard, Danish theologian, philosopher and prophetic voice of the 19th century, speaks of disciples at second hand - those who live through an experience only through second hand information. They are not really there; they only hear about the moment, the wonder, the real thing.

And who are these disciples? They are Peter and James and John, Andrew, Nathaniel, and the rest of the twelve - those who traveled with him, listened to him, ate with him and finally abandoned him.

Well, you say, that is a strange twist. I would have thought they were the disciples at first hand who encountered him in the flesh and witnessed to their experience in order that subsequent generations, indeed we ourselves, reading their witness, might become disciples at second hand.

And that, of course, is precisely the reaction Kierkegaard was hoping to elicit in order to make his fascinating assertion that being a disciple at first hand has nothing to do with historical or physical proximity, but rather with the insight of faith that is the gift of the Spirit of God - an insight that was more likely to be the experience of one who walked with him in the flesh in the first century than of one who experienced him through the Spirit's fire in the twentieth century.

Let me ask you - if you could choose to have been present during the days of Jesus' flesh as opposed to the experience of him here and now through the Spirit - which would you choose?

Not, would you choose to live in the first century as opposed to the twentieth - just whether you would choose to have been present, on the scene, when he was teaching and healing in the days of his human, historical existence, or to experience him in a moment of revealing - a spiritual encounter, a burning sensation of present grace and love and beauty. Which would you choose?

Unless freed to think deeply about this, I suspect the immediate response would be for most of us that we would choose to have been there. And if so, it is not

surprising, for Christian piety has conditioned us thus. For example, take The Old Hymnbook, #460 - "I Think When I Read That Sweet Story of Old," a children's hymn, vs. 1: "I should like to have been with them then;" vs. 2, "I wish that His hands had been placed on my head;" That, however, is not possible; however..., vs. 3: "Yet still to His footstool in prayer I may go." That I can do now and, "If I now earnestly serve Him below, I shall see Him and serve Him above."

Now do you see there are two golden ages, so to speak? The days of the flesh, now out of the question, and Heaven, still in the future. And in the meantime, this in-between time, prayer is a present possibility, but something less than past reality of physical presence, or future reality in Heaven.

My experience tells me that has been a rather persistent and consistent Christian perspective. To be a disciple at first hand requires either being present with Jesus in the days of his flesh, or some day, "Face to Face," but now the best we can be is Disciples at Second Hand, reliving the stories of the past - imagining the glory that will be - but stuck in history's ongoing development with prayer our only access.

Now, let me say clearly that is to miss the reality of Easter. Easter is to be experienced here and now, ever anew in the community of faith that lives in the Presence of the Spirit of God, which is the spirit of the Living Christ. That is the message of the Easter Gospel Lesson - the story of the encounter with the risen Christ on the Emmaus Road. Luke alone tells this resurrection story. Two disciples are leaving Jerusalem on Easter afternoon. They are dejected, discouraged, disappointed. Their world has collapsed, their hopes crushed, their dreams dashed. As they walk along the road to their home village of Emmaus, the Risen One joins them, but to them, he seems a stranger. He sees that they are sad of heart and inquires as to the reason. They cannot believe anyone could be ignorant of what has just transpired. They tell him of the death of the one they had hoped would redeem Israel. The stranger chides them for their foolishness, their slowness of heart to believe the Scriptures concerning the destiny of the Messiah. They approach the village and the stranger appears to be going on, but they invite him to join them as it is eventide and the day is far spent. The stranger accepts, enters their home, joins them at table and then assumes the role of host. He took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly their eyes were opened and they recognized him; it was he, Jesus, alive and present. And just the moment they recognized him, he vanished from their sight. Then, on reflection they say to each other, did not our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the way! Evening or not, they left the evening meal which had become a Eucharistic Feast, and returned to Jerusalem with the exciting news. The Lord has risen indeed!

He was made known to us in the breaking of the bread. This is a beautiful Easter story. Its meaning is that being a disciple at first hand has nothing to do with historical, physical proximity to Jesus - whether the Pre-Easter Jesus, or the

Post-Easter Jesus. It has to do with recognition, with eyes opened by the Spirit, with the experience of a Presence that makes the heart burn.

In a lecture at Oregon State University a year ago, the New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, host of a conference entitled "Jesus at 2000," quoted his colleague, John Dominic Crossan, who claims "Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens." Borg writes, "Emmaus happens again and again. Or, to echo the title of one of my books, Emmaus is a story about meeting Jesus again for the first time. Easter is about the Living Lord who journeys with us whether we recognize him or not. But, there are moments when we become aware of a Presence. There are moments when we know he is with us. That he lives. That we, too, are gripped and grasped by life, the gift of the Living God who again and again shatters the darkness, breaks the chains of oppression, overcomes the worst that evil can do. The God Whose light broke forth on Easter morning and shines and will shine until all is well."

The aisle down which you will walk to this table set with bread and cup is the Emmaus Road. This moment, as every moment, is potentially the moment of fire and recognition, of burning heart and sheer joy when suddenly we know, we know a gracious presence enveloping us. We entered this Holy Season around the Table that is at the center of the Christian worship experience. Table fellowship was the hallmark of Jesus' ministry - the ministry of the Pre-Easter Jesus. All were welcome. All sorts and conditions of persons came; open table fellowship was the sign of the unbrokered Presence of God - the God Who is accessible to all - in a sanctuary, or at the seaside, with or without a priest or rabbi.

On the night in which he was betrayed, he gathered his intimate friends around the Table, took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them.

We entered this Holy Season around our Lord's Table and I suggested, in spite of the architecture which does not lend itself to table fellowship, nevertheless, we look at the Faces Around the Table - into the faces of one another - brothers and sisters with whom we have joined in this pilgrimage of faith, in whose faces we see God's Presence and experience God's grace.

I made the point then that the Kingdom of God is not "up above us" in some heavenly realm, nor "out ahead of us" in some future age, but here and now. God's Presence is present to us in present experience as we look into each other's faces. In the intimacy of table fellowship, in the intimate connection with the other, we experience God's Presence as the Other.

Have we not had such moments ... Can you not remember immediately such a moment full of fire and the reality of recognition when you knew more deeply than concept could contain or words explain - that God is - that Grace is - that all will be well, all manner of things will be well - perhaps a sense of comfort in the midst of deep grief, of calm in the midst of great danger, of overwhelming love in

the embrace of another, in a child's face, the peace of a craggy countenance of one breathing her last.

Moments to remember because they are moments of recognition. Moments we would grasp and freeze and hold forever, but moments only, not once for all, but again and again, as grace breaks over us. That is Emmaus - that is Easter.

They recognized him in the breaking of the bread - at a kitchen table in a Judean Village, and sad and faithless hearts leapt for joy in flames of deep knowing and trust . No weariness can contain them - they run to the city to proclaim, The Lord is risen!