

Christ Church + Washington Parish

Practice: Worship, Luke 24:28-35

The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli

January 27, 2019

Today we continue our Way of Love series – an exploration of the spiritual practices that are core to living as a Christian. Information about all seven practices are available at either entrance and the Welcome table in the parish hall. Last week we explored Learn; this week our focus on Worship sends us to the end of a well-known story – the walk to Emmaeus. Typically we read it in the weeks after Easter – this story of two previously unknown disciples walking the 7 mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaeus soon after Jesus’ death. They have heard from some women disciples that Jesus had risen, but they had not seen it for themselves. Their reaction to the speculative news– get out of town. But even as they escape the grief and drama of the last few days, they can’t keep themselves from talking about it. Rehashing it. Speculating on it. It’s like the shutdown these past few weeks for some of us; desperate to escape the issue but difficult not to let it creep into every discussion.

While the two disciples were on the road talking about what had happened with Jesus’ death and what the women said about his rising, Jesus appeared to them, but they didn’t recognize him. He walked at their side, listened to their grief, and then began to tell about what God was doing through him by telling the stories of Scripture. They still didn’t know who he was, but they liked listening to him - their hearts were strangely warmed by his words and they invited him to stay for the evening with them. When they were again at table with him, and as he’d done that final night of his life, he took the bread and blessed and broke it – that is when they recognized him. And then he disappeared.

For those who follow Jesus, every road is a road to Emmaus. We are going from point A to point B, whether we know it or not. And maybe we are more focused on where we've been or maybe we're more focused on where we're going or maybe we aren't focused on either, rather consumed or grounded in the present. We're all on the road to somewhere, and for Christians, every road is a road to Emmaus, because on the road with us is Jesus, but most of the time we don't recognize him, because he's hidden in the people we meet, in the events of our lives and that of the world, and even within ourselves in ways that we don't recognize. But then, once a week, we show up in church, and in community with others, we focus our attention on Jesus, or at least we make a best effort of the week at it. We sing songs about God. We hear stories read aloud from Jesus' life. Someone takes the time, as Jesus did for the disciples on the road, to interpret those texts and bring them into conversation with our lives and the world. Sometimes when a person is speaking, our minds or our hearts are poked or inspired. Sometimes in the voices of prayer, our hearts soften. At confession, we have a place for our regrets and reminded of the grace we receive and the forgiveness we are called to offer others. In the peace, we share in that moment of all of us being connected.

As the worship experience continues, we eventually gather around a table, an altar, the table of his last supper. We tell the story of that fateful meal, and then take part in it, sacramentally. We don't believe that it's Jesus' blood and body being shared when we take communion, but we also don't think it's a symbol either. We believe in the real presence of God at the altar; we believe it feeds us and sometimes you will even feel it feeding you, strengthening you. Not all the time; not every Sunday, but often enough to trust it as real.

Once the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus, he vanished from their sight. I get that. I've had my share of these type of experiences in worship – times where I felt Jesus near and my heart “burning within” me as the gospel text says. Sometimes that burning feels warm and cozy – like watching a couple who prayed countless prayers for a child bring that baby to worship or seeing the congregation sing a well-know hymn, not with their heads in their hymnals, but their eyes looking up, beyond themselves, together to God. Sometimes that burning feels more challenging, set a fire under my butt kind of way – like it's really time to forgive that person and let go of that grudge. Or in the silent times of the prayers when we offer those people and situations in need of prayer, and I feel that it is time to do more than pray.

So many times the Spirit catches me in worship for no particular reason that I can identify or interpret, but I feel all the same. The moment is fleeting; as soon as I recognize it, it disappears like Jesus in this gospel, but it stays with me. To be honest though, I too get overly familiar, shall we say, with the service. What to expect, when to expect it, attuned to when someone misses a cue, not paying attention to the words that come from my lips. But there's two things that I remind myself when worship gets stale for me; I offer them to you for what they are worth.

1) During our exchange of the peace may be the only time some people are touched with affection in their week. 2) This Eucharist may be someone's last. A little dark I know, but reminding myself of these things regrounds me in the sacred ground upon which we stand each week on the same day in the same place at the same hour. It may be routine, but it is still special and holy.

In this Way of Love series on spiritual practices, Worship may be the easiest one for you. You are here today. Some of you are quite good at it; you come most Sundays and have made it a central practice to your faith. But there is no denying that coming to worship has been a decreasing practice of the faith over the years even among the faithful. When once coming almost every Sunday was considered regularly attending, now twice a month is considered regular and for some people, they consider once a month regular. There are just too many competing claims on very small windows of our free time. I hear them all: guests in town, children's birthday parties, brunch with friends, sports games, too tired, the service isn't at the right time to fit into the other things I want to do. I hear these reasons from people who all would also say that worship is important; it nourishes them and refreshes them – sometimes it may bore them (they don't tell me that, but I've been bored in worship too so I know) – but overall they value worship as something that shapes their lives. Worship is important, but rarely urgent, which allows those things that are more urgent – a game, a birthday party, rest, to take over. Sometimes other things do need to take precedence, but how often until not urgent leads to not important. If we don't set aside time to listen, to pray, to share a meal together, how will our hearts be burning and our eyes opened to Jesus on the road with us?

Maybe you can – maybe you can see and follow Jesus without regular worship – or maybe you can convince yourself that you can – I won't challenge that right now, but what I will say that while worship is important for individual growth, it's also at a fundamental level, not about you. Worship isn't about me and it isn't about you. It's about us. It's the one time in our week, in our society, that we come together before God, knit together by our shared reverence and humility before something larger than ourselves.

We celebrate communion in two ways here – either kneeling at the altar rail or standing in a circle for communion. Young knees, old worn out knees, rich, poor, devout, skeptical – all kneel together at the rail with outreached hands before God. No matter who we are, we share a common need – to be fed. For those who gather in the circle, with antsy children and some awkwardness in eye contact, we are reminded that the way we are fed by God is together. Those two things can't happen anywhere else but here.

On our road to Emmaus, may worship be a place where you pull aside from the road, be fed, and see the divine, no matter how fleeting, in your life.