

## STUCK IN YOUR STORY

*the Rev. Dr. Paula Northwood*  
*Acting Senior Minister*

*May 3, 2020*

**Text: Luke 24:13–35**

Have ever been in a situation where you saw someone, and they looked familiar, but you just couldn't place them? You ask yourself all these questions: "Do I know them from school, work or church? Are they the clerk from the hardware store? Have I met them at a party? How do I know them?" And, if you are lucky, maybe later you will have an aha moment: You remember who they are and why you know them. If you are like me, sometimes the delay is days, or never.

Many of you know the Serenity Prayer, but maybe you have heard of the Senility Prayer: *God grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked, the good fortune to bump into the ones I do, and the ability to recognize the difference.* Recognition, it's very important. We like to be recognized.

In our story, these two followers of Jesus fail to recognize him, not because of senility, but why? We can imagine all kinds of reasons. For one thing, he was supposed to be dead. And while Mary Magdalene and other women tried to convince the disciples otherwise, the disciples did not initially believe them. They called their story an "idle tale." Recognizing Jesus might have required these disciples to admit to their own sexism. It would have required them to acknowledge that these women, whom they had chosen not to believe, were somehow telling the truth.

Daniel Berrigan, Catholic priest and pacifist, put forth the idea that Jesus's disciples failed to recognize him because his body was broken. Jesus appeared as he was, the victim of torture: bruised, swollen and disfigured in some way. Other scholars suggest that the reason he was not recognized is that the resurrected body is spirit-like, different from a human body. We just don't know.

But what if it happened like this? Our two disciples debated, argued, bickered and maybe even wept as they walked down the road to Emmaus. And as they walked, suddenly something miraculous happened: They began to understand more fully, more deeply what Jesus was all about. This divine presence became palpable in their midst; something felt different. And later when they broke bread together, they felt the divine stirring within. It was the same feeling they had when they were with Jesus before his execution. They felt Jesus still with them when they recognized the divine in each other. They found each other on the road to Emmaus.

Understood this way, the story is about what prevents our two disciples from recognizing the Christ who is always present. At the beginning of the journey, they were stuck in their own story, their expectations, disappointments to the point that they are unable to see the person standing right before them. They were trapped in the past, filled with self-pity, disappointment and doubt. They wanted a leader who would overthrow the empire, and instead they got a man executed by the empire for sedition. He was a traitor. When you are steeped in disappointment and hurt, no one can recognize anything in this state.

Have you ever been there? Maybe during this time it is bringing up some old stuff for you. Have you ever looked at the person sitting across from you, and you feel hurt, disappointment and betrayal? They are

not acting like the parent you want. They are not behaving like the child you want. They are not responding like the spouse or friend you want. They are not acting like the church you expected. What prevents us from really recognizing each other? Is it because we are stuck in our old hurts, resentments and unwillingness to forgive? Like those two disciples, are we are stuck in our story, trapped in the past?

In our text, as Jesus walks with them, and, in whatever form, he does a beautiful thing. He helps rewrite the story. He reinterprets the Hebrew scriptures anew, weaving it into their lives so powerfully that they exclaim, “Did not our hearts burn within us?” Finally, they see! They have come to understand that the power of the divine is with them always . . . that the power to let go of all hurts and resentments is within reach. The power to have freedom from the constraints of negativity, fear and hate is possible.

Years ago, I accompanied a group of teenagers to Bogotá, Colombia, on a service and education trip. We were volunteering at a youth camp and daycare, but, more importantly, we were listening and learning from the Colombians about the political impact of the United States on their lives. One morning, we were caring for a group of children from the barrio, many of them abandoned and homeless. One of our group, a teenager, was holding a small child, covered with sores and with a runny nose. The child was fussing, and in Spanish the teenager asked the child his name. The child said, “Jesús.” The girl, her eyes wide open, whispered “Jesus?” “Yes, Jesus,” I said. Her eyes were opened to a whole new understanding of God incarnate. We are often blind to the many ways that God shows up in our lives.

During this unprecedented time, we often long for things to get back to normal, but we hold it in tension with the knowledge that what was “normal” was not always healthy for us or the planet. We have been given this gift, a little blip of time, where we can step back and examine the lives we have been leading. Where are we stuck? Where are you stuck? What are those things that keep us stuck in our own story?

I used to guide a wilderness canoe trip up in the Boundary Waters. One rainy day, on a portage trail, I got stuck in the mud so deep I couldn’t move. Luckily, others on the trip were there to take the canoe and my pack and pull me out. Sometimes we need some help when we are stuck.

Recently, Nina Jonson, Plymouth Programs Manager, told this story at staff meeting: A four-year-old child of our church had a Zoom meeting with Nina because he was feeling frustrated by this whole COVID-19 thing. He was particularly frustrated by the fact that there was a playground across the street and he was not allowed to use it. After sharing his feelings, Nina asked, “How are you feeling now?” He said, “I have more space in my body.”

My friends, even though we cannot be together physically, we can be present to each other in ways that help pull us out of the mud. We do not need to remain stuck in our story. We can create more space in our hearts and in our bodies. We can seek forgiveness. We can offer forgiveness. We can change the way we have been living to help sustain our planet. We can be a bit more curious and less critical. We can be kind instead of stuck in our righteousness.

The Jesus story is one of empowerment. The journey to Emmaus is about recognizing our own empowerment. I close with a section from *Emmaus Poem* by Nancy McDonald:

*... Then, at this point  
a stranger joined us  
Did he make a third  
or were we still just two?  
We were not sure ourselves  
but know for certain  
when bread was broken  
time was fractured, too  
And when we rose and left the table*

*we were different  
ourselves yet more than selves  
rose up to leave*

*Bones of fire now support us  
so full of love that  
it hurts our lungs to breathe...  
This road to nowhere goes  
on forever  
out from Emmaus into a waiting world...*

Let us go forth with fire in our bones so full of love it hurts to breathe, unstuck and free. May it be so.  
Amen.