

BLINDNESS
Luke 24: 13-35

Many years ago, June and I read the book “Excavating Jesus” by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed. It was about the archeology that revealed what 1st century Palestine looked like in Jesus’ time. At the time the book was published there was no evidence that the town of Emmaus ever existed. Crossan maintained that this story of the road to Emmaus was not intended to be a historical account of what happened, rather this story was a metaphor. Crossan concluded “Emmaus is nowhere and it is everywhere. Emmaus never happened. Emmaus is always happening.” It is one of those stories that never really happened, but we know it is true.

On Easter day, two people left Jerusalem – the place of great sorrow - and walked the dusty road toward Emmaus. Shocked by grief and loss and confusion, neither one recognized Jesus when he joined the two on their walk away from Jerusalem. “What are you guys talking about?” Jesus asks. The two stop dead in their tracks and blurt out “haven’t you heard what happened? You must be the only one in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard.” “Well, what happened?”, Jesus replies. And, so, the two walkers tell Jesus all that had happened during the previous week. Jesus, their Messiah, had been crucified. He was dead, he was placed in a

tomb, and now his body is missing. “But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.”

But we had hoped. In those short, simple words, you can hear their crushing despair. The future they had envisioned and had anticipated, died on the cross with Jesus. Life can't get any darker than it is right now. They were so enveloped in their sorrow that they didn't see that it was Jesus who was walking with them. Jesus reminds the two walkers that all the prophets, beginning with Moses, had foretold that the Messiah would come to save Israel, but he would have to suffer. And still, the two were blinded by their grief.

I think it is fair to say that at one time or another we've all been so swallowed up by hopelessness that we couldn't see clearly. For some of us, like the two men, grief has blinded us. For some, anger over being hurt has blinded us, for some of us depression has blinded us, for others it's abuse, for some of us it is the stress that comes from too many demands (real and imagined) that we can't all fulfill, and for others, rejection blinds us and for some of us despair about the direction that our society is taking blinds us. We can't seem to see that there is a way out.

I've joined several of you in explorations of religions or religious practices that are quite different (and yet the same) from our own. In Sunday school, we

are reading “The Light We Give”, by the Sikh scholar Simran Jeet Singh. I saw one website recommend this book to all news junkies who are discouraged by the direction of our country. We are learning from Singh that, since 9-11, the Sikh community has been subjected to hate-driven violence and discrimination. He talks about anger as the first response to the hatred that the Sikhs were enduring. It would be so easy to withdraw from the world and allow that anger to dictate his world view. But that is not the Sikh way of encountering the world. He describes his struggle with re-visioning the tormenters. What good can he find in them? What light can Singh offer them in their broken world? Even harder to contemplate – what light can the tormenters offer to the darkness? How can Singh allow his light and their light to shine? Singh describes his transformation from being blinded by darkness to recognizing light in everyone – even those who hate who he stands for. It was for him both a community of supporters, but much internal re-visioning. Singh’s message is challenging to us, because it calls us to a higher way of living in this world.

In Pie group, we are reading “Dancing the Dream: the Seven Sacred Paths of Human Transformation” by Jamie Sams who is Cherokee and teaches us from her Native American spiritual journey along these 7 paths – like the road to

Emmaus. It would take me several lifetimes to complete the 7 paths. I've already decided that I don't want to go past step 5. Just drop me off at the next bus stop.

But to give Jamie Sams a respectable consideration, let me tell you what I've learned from her. Everybody at many points in their lifetime encounters traps that diminish our ability to reach our full human potential. These traps keep us from living with integrity, they keep us from recognizing boundaries that are appropriate and safeguard us from further traps and the traps cause us to lose sight of who we are and how we can do good in the world. Being stuck in a quagmire creates misery, anger, dissatisfaction. The sacred paths help us recognize our trappings and find our way back onto the path. It requires meditation and introspection. It doesn't change the world, but it changes how we interact with the world. Like the Sikh teachings, the transformation and re-vision comes from within, but requires community support.

Every Monday, Rich and I meet with the Venerable Pamokkha, the monk at the Karen Buddhist temple in Indianola. The original plan was for Pamokkha to learn English. But the meetings have transitioned into Pammokkha teaching us about Buddhism – which is his ultimate goal in learning English. We have been tackling a major teaching of the Buddha called “patticasumuppada”. It is hard to

understand how a Buddhist thinks or, perhaps more accurately, how a Buddhist understands the human realm, but we are working on it.

I finally figured out this past week that Patticasumuppada reveals the life cycle of the human mind and human emotions. The cycle begins with the previous life, continues through the current life, and transitions into the next life. The cycle is a continuous journey of cause and effect. But the important idea for the Buddhist is how the patticasumuppada explains how suffering originates, because in order to end suffering, it is important to know where suffering came from. No one is exempt from the path of patticasumuppada. We all suffer. And, we are our own cause of suffering. The solution to suffering is to change ourselves.

Suffering – and I’m using this word rather loosely because it means something a bit different to each of us - seems to be a central theme of the 4 religious traditions that I have been exposed to in the past several months. Suffering’s consequences are universal. Suffering will blind us from the goodness around us and suffering holds us back from all we can become. The release from suffering also seems to be universal. It is a transformative process of changing how we view our world and encounter it with grace. We cannot change the

world, and even if we could change the world, it wouldn't eliminate our suffering. Only we can restore our light.

Of all of the ways that I've learned about, I appreciated the Sikh tradition the most. Although it is hard for me to comprehend how a Sikh person can learn to love the people who hate and cause harm to the Sikh community, I can understand the power of transforming suffering into compassion. On a very practical side, it makes hatred so ineffectual. Singh, our Sikh guide, didn't make the transformative process sound easy. It is something he has worked hard on and would agree, that he will never be fully successful.

I don't think you can simply eliminate the hatred and suffering that sits on us like an elephant. It would leave a void that might be as bad as the hatred we were able to expel. Something has to fill the space we vacated. The Sikh teaching suggests one thing we can use to fill the void is gratitude. And so when my internal dialogue is getting the best of me, I shift the focus to gratitude.

I am grateful that I now know what love is and I feel loved by my Iowa and Michigan family. I am grateful for the smell of dirt, and grass, and trees and flowers. I am grateful for sweat and the shower that follows. I'm grateful that I can still learn new things. I am grateful that I want to learn new things. I am grateful for the happy faces of students learning English, knowing that for some of

them, what brought them to our English-learning class in West Des Moines was a long, challenging road.

And I am grateful that my suffering, my gladness, and my vision come from within me. It is completely my choice to remain blinded by suffering or be released from it to live more fully, despite what the world around me is telling me. Nobody can strip me of that choice. I always have the potential to transform my vision from hate to love, suffering to gratitude, emptiness to fullness.

As the two walkers got close to Emmaus, they invited Jesus to spend the night with them and he agreed to join them. When Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, and shared the bread with the two travelers, they recognized Jesus. Everything was not lost. There really is a Messiah and shared bread with us. The two immediately got up and went back to Jerusalem – the place of deep sorrow – bringing with them renewed hope.

BENEDICTION:

Song on the road to Emmaus. Dorothee Soelle
Revolutionary Patience (Orbis, 1977)
pp. 46-48

So long we have been walking
away from the city of our hope
to a village where life is said to be better

Hadn't we thought
we could overcome fear
the fear of the old pieceworker
that she'll have to take sick leave
the fear of the turkish girl
that she'll be deported
the fear of the haunted neurotic
that he'll be committed
forever

So long we have been walking
in the same wrong direction
away from the city of our hope
to the village where there's supposed to be water

Hadn't we thought
we were free and could liberate
all those poor devils
the working man's child held back and punished
in school
the adolescent on his motorbike
sent to the wrong work
for life
the deaf and dumb
in the wrong country
at the wrong time
silenced by working

a lifetime
for bread alone

So long we have been walking
in the same direction
away from the city
where our hope is still buried

Then we met someone
who shared his bread with us
who showed us the new water
here in the city of our hope
I am the water
you are the water
he is the water
she is the water

Then we turned around and went
back to the city of our buried hope
up to jerusalem

He who brought water is with us
he who brought bread is with us
we shall find the water
we shall be the water

I am the water of life
you are the water of life
we are the water of life
we shall find the water
we shall be the water