

Recognizing A Suffering God

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Luke 24 13-35

I had some misgivings, as you can imagine, even as I pulled over to stop on the shoulder that day on Rt. 29 north. It was over 25 years ago and I was headed back home to Remington where I had an Administrative Board meeting that evening. It was absolutely pouring down rain and I was coming up on Elkwood, a little wide place in the road about four or five miles on the Culpeper side of Remington. All of a sudden, up ahead a little, there he was, standing there in the rain with no shirt on, hitch-hiking. Now, granted it was mid-July and plenty warm out, but it was raining like crazy. I had some misgivings, but I pulled over to let him in. He got in and he asked me how far I was going. I told him I was just going into Remington, and I asked where he was going, where he wanted me to let him off. After a pause, he said, "I'll go to Remington," as if that were a whole new plan that he was coming up with on the fly.

I sensed there was something not quite right about him, like all the synapses weren't firing off in the right sequence or something. After another minute, he turned full face to me and asked, "Do you know me?" I didn't, of course. I'd never seen him before in my life and told him, "no, I don't." He looked at me again and said, "you don't know me?"

Truth was, I didn't know him from Adam. Weird, you never know what strangers you might meet on the road, which I guess is why I don't *usually* pick up hitch-hikers.

The stranger these two met on the road to the village of Emmaus, was Jesus, of course, the risen Jesus. But, they didn't know him from Adam, either. Now, that's a common theme in most of the resurrection appearance stories. Even his closest disciples have trouble recognizing him. I suppose you could say lots of different things about that, and it might be necessary to look at each story on it's own to see what each writer perhaps wanted to say about what it took for them to recognize him, and what that means for how *we* do or don't recognize him. For Luke, in this story, it seems to have to do with their disappointed expectations about who Jesus was. They had apparently heard not only his powerful preaching and teaching both to those in power and to those on the fringes of society, but had also seen his mighty deeds of healing and casting out demons.

And all of that had fed their expectations about who he was. They really thought and hoped he was the mighty redeemer of God, the One who, as they tell him, would liberate Israel from Rome! That, of course, hadn't happened. And not only had he not set Israel free from Rome, but he had suffered and been killed at the hands of Rome and other corrupt powers. As they say in telling the story, "our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to set Israel free." So, what they're saying is, "we obviously had that wrong. We know now that he wasn't the Messiah, after all." And so, they're despondent. But, do you hear that? They didn't see him right back then, so why would they be able to recognize him now? He wasn't who they thought they wanted and needed.

Well, the fact is, much of the time Jesus is *not* the God we think we want and need. And that's all centered on our vulnerability and on the threat of and the experience of suffering isn't it? How can a God who suffers offer us what we need in the face of the world? We need a God who can achieve victory with shock and awe! We want a God about whom we can say, "well, even if we don't understand it, we know that it's God's will. God's in control of everything." But, Jesus had *control* over nothing except his own ability to keep suffering *with* all who were suffering and loving and forgiving and giving himself away. If we didn't want and think that we need a God who is in control of everything and who therefore is above suffering, why, say when a child is run over by a car, or accidentally falls into a river and drowns, why would we say to hurting parents and family and friends, "God took him," or "God needed her in heaven,

so God took her,” or “It was their time, it was in God's plan?” Why would we say that in the face of that kind of tragedy and grief? Why would we say that a hurricane was God's will, God's punishment that causes suffering for all kinds of innocent people who had nothing to do with the supposed sins being punished? Would we rather make God into a monster than think of life as being ultimately fragile and vulnerable and not under control?

Some may even call that faith; you know trusting that even though we don't understand it all, it's still under God's control. And that may be some kind of faith, but it's not Christian faith! Because Christian faith is about trusting in whom Jesus reveals God to be. And Jesus was not a monster. Jesus understood and lived God's power as love and love doesn't *control* anything or anybody. Love just delights in the other, and in whatever, because it or they are delightful to it. No wonder we have so much trouble recognizing the risen Lord among us. He's not the God we think we need!

Listen to this story. You see why these two disciples can't recognize him? They can't get over the suffering. They think of suffering as something foreign to God and so they can't recognize this One who suffers, as the living God. So now they think the story of Jesus is a story about death. They can't see him next to them, so they don't know that the story of Jesus is a story about life, even their common lives. I mean, these weren't big name disciples. One of their names we don't even know, and the other, Cleopas, we never hear about ever again. And they lived in a village that was apparently so small and inconsequential that today scholars can't figure out where it was!

And yet, this remarkable story is about them and about that nowhere place. The risen Jesus walks with them on the dusty road of their disappointment. He interprets their scriptures to them in a way that they begin to understand a God who somehow must suffer. In this remarkable story, God is found and finally recognized as a stranger, who after they have shown him hospitality, somehow becomes host to them and serves them. How many times have people coming back from Project Crossroads, or some other mission trip said, “These people we helped, ministered to me, were Christ to me.”? So Jesus takes the bread, blesses it as a sacred gift of God, and breaks it and gives it to them.

Friends, God is not far off in heaven somewhere where every now and then He intervenes to take someone away to be with himself, or to send a hurricane to punish someone, or even to perform a miraculous healing. God is walking right beside us, sharing every moment of this life with us right now. Why would God need to take someone away to be with himself? God is already with them. They're already with God! And why would God have to intervene to perform a miraculous healing? The healing power in our bodies and in the medicines and therapies discovered in the world are themselves the creative, sustaining, loving power of God.

So, yes God suffers with us, not because God likes to suffer, or even because God chooses to suffer to show us he's a good guy. God suffers because God loves. And when something tragic happens to something or someone you love, it hurts. And as Stanley Hauerwas, professor of theology at Duke, has said, explanations are not what we need in the face of tragedy. You know, all that stuff about God being in control, that's an explanation that finally is a way to try to not feel what we're feeling. But, we're good creations of God; we're made to feel what we feel. Explanations are not what we need in the face of tragedy. What we need in the face of tragedy is love.

Friends, this story says that we can let all that other “faith” go and step forth in Christian faith, and begin to recognize God walking with us everywhere. We can step forth in Christian faith and begin to know a God who though not in *control* of everything, is present in everything and continues to love us and suffers with us when we suffer. We can step forth in Christian faith and discover that in serving others, in offering simple hospitality, we find ourselves deeply

sustained by the God who is strangely present to us in *them*. It's what we celebrate and affirm in this meal we eat together this morning. Here, now and always, God is right beside you asking, "Do you know me?" May our eyes be open that we might recognize him and know he is risen indeed.