

On The Road
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Elon Community Church
April 25, 2008

Isaiah 43:18-19, 49:11-13
Luke 24: 13-32

Walking is a spiritual exercise, as well as a physical one. As hikers, some of us enjoy traipsing silent paths through forests, or along mountain ridges, or the edges of maritime estuaries. Others of us grab our sneakers and hit the sidewalks of our neighborhoods for early morning walks that are good for mind and body.

Walking can be done alone, but the times that have been most powerful to me have been those occasions where I have walked with others, sharing a particular road, discussing and talking about events in the world and in our lives.

These encounters on the road can be meetings with the Risen Christ, one who is recognized in the face of a stranger. The scripture from Luke today is one of the most beloved stories of Jesus' appearances after his death. The narrator has let the reader in on the irony that the two travelers on the Emmaus road are really sharing their journey with Jesus, the very one who is the subject of their discussion, but for some reason they do not recognize him. Indeed the word used for Jesus, is *paroikos*, which can be translated as *visitor, stranger, or alien*.

Jesus draws near the two and asks them, "What are you talking about as you walk along?" They are so astonished at this question that they stop in mid-stride. The text reads, "They stood still, with sad faces. One of them, named Cleopas, asks him, 'Are you the only *paroikos*, the only stranger or visitor in Jerusalem, who doesn't know the things that have been happening there these last few days?'"

And the two companions begin to tell Jesus the story of his own life and death. They spoke of dashed hopes, of their expectation that the prophet Jesus was to have been a political leader, come to free Israel from the oppression of empire. But, Jesus meets them at the point of their loss, and begins teaching them a different view. He uses the prophetic scriptures of the past to interpret the violence of his death in a different way. His suffering and death at the hands of political leaders was a consequence of his radical ministry of inclusiveness and love.

The two disciples learn that the true realm of God, the realm of distributive justice and peace for all peoples, is not one that has ended with the death of Jesus. Indeed, that Jesus is now the one who walks beside them, making as if to go further, the One revealed in the intimate act of breaking bread and sharing a meal.

In the words of writer Patrick Henry, if we look for "field marks of grace" in our own lives, those times when we recognize God's presence in hindsight, we can see where God has also met us on the road or in the face of a stranger sitting across from us at supper. The hymn we sang a few minutes ago says it well: "We have walked with him as strangers through the journey of the day, and have told him of the violence that has swept our hope away. He has offered words of comfort, words of energy and light. Did our hearts not blaze within us as he broke the bread this night?"

I want to tell you of a couple of Emmaus walks in my own life, times when I have been blessed by the companionship of strangers who have shared the road or table with me. A few years ago, I was part of the Carolina Interfaith Task Force annual pilgrimage for justice and peace, a walk during Holy Week that has been going on for 25 years. I was one of 12 core walkers attempting to raise awareness about issues of justice affecting the people of Central America and North Carolina, as we traversed the state from Charlotte to Wilmington. Along the way, I wrote a journal about my thoughts and the people we

encountered on our trek. The Saturday before we left I wrote: "I am hoping this will be a journey of the heart as well as prophetic witness. I will try to open myself to the spiritual teachers that I am sure will await me along the way".

As it turned out, there were spiritual teachers aplenty that week! In Wilmington, there was Laura Vinson, a Quaker activist who volunteers as a translator at clinics and courthouse. She told us that homeless shelters are not options for undocumented immigrants in the area because of rules that all overnight guests must have a form of identification. This means that many Latino immigrants might get a meal but then must leave to sleep under a bridge. "Several times in the past," Laura told me, "I've taken older Mexican men home with me to stay in my garage because I couldn't stand seeing them homeless. My husband says he never knows who I will bring home with me at the end of the day."

In Greensboro, I met Joyce and Nelson Johnson and other members of the Beloved Community. The Johnsons and other community activists founded the Beloved Community Center (BCC) in Greensboro in 1991, in part to consolidate their work with the poor and disenfranchised in the city. Rev. Johnson joined our group as we gathered on the sidewalk outside of the Woolworth's store and cafeteria where the famous sit-in occurred that helped launch the civil rights movement in North Carolina. Now a civil rights museum, the Woolworth's façade is still intact, but the windows bear striking new images of the black students who courageously waited to be served, as well as a policeman with a menacing dog lunging on a leash.

We stood on the sidewalk outside, arm in arm, singing "We Shall Overcome". Curious Latino construction workers emerged from inside where the museum was being renovated, and some of the members of our group spoke to them in Spanish about the history of the building where they were working. The workers were intrigued and amazed. No one had told them the story before. They joined us as we sang.

Other days on our pilgrimage saw our group walking through farm country in Nash County, or through Durham to meet with striking textile workers. We ended the week on Good Friday at noon at the State Capitol. In my journal I described my feelings as this journey came to a close:

As I march beside the other core walkers, our purple t-shirts a bit wrinkled and dusty from several days of wear, I feel a deep sense of gratitude. Friendships have blossomed. Matters of the heart have been honestly shared. We have indeed been fellow pilgrims who have journeyed to holy places and have come away blessed.

Sharing life stories on the road... this is how we meet one another. This is one way we encounter the Risen Christ. Another road trip in my life where God met me in the form of a stranger was when I traveled to Colombia as part of a delegation with Witness for Peace in January of 2003. The purpose of this delegation was to speak with people in Colombia who have been directly impacted by the ongoing violence in that country, to bear witness to their suffering, and to share their stories with our U.S. political leaders. The following story is part of a sermon I preached two weeks after I returned to North Carolina.

After a few days in Bogota, we traveled south to the state of Putumayo. Our group had been invited to a small town in the northern section of the region by some outspoken priests. Sibundoy is a picturesque village of flowers, stuccoed houses, and mountains. It had largely escaped the violence experienced by other towns in the Amazon area until a few months before we came. But then confrontations between guerrilla and paramilitary groups began in earnest, and the townspeople were caught in the crossfire. As we heard from so many families, it was impossible to be seen as neutral. The armed groups would demand allegiance. Not helping them would be construed as helping the "enemy".

When we arrived on January 21 2003, there had been 26 killings since the end of November. Seven local priests seized on the idea of hosting a Mass for Peace at the church on the town square. They begged us to come. The idea was that an international presence that was visible and publicized would be a good thing. Our little delegation of blue-shirted gringos might make the armed groups realize that their actions were not going unnoticed, and that the international community cared about what was happening.

When we arrived, we were met at the tiny airport by Padre Raoul, the priest at a neighboring town, and a church worker named Marta. We boarded a bus for the hour drive. I sat with Marta and listened to her speak of the families she knew affected by the recent violence. We shared that bus trip together, and I listened with a heavy heart. She was a young, vibrant woman of about thirty, and she had seen too much. But then, we looked out the window, and she pointed out some of the exotic flowers as we drove past. She told me that almost everyday she goes into the forest to collect orchids. She tries to save and grow some of the rarer species which are slowly disappearing. This, she says, gives life to her soul. This is her way of defying the forces of violence and death. It is an act of spiritual resistance.

Padre Raoul, like Marta, was also a man who did not let fear and sadness overwhelm him. He loved to laugh, he loved a good joke, (he had several about priests), and he thought it was very funny when we told him that our group's code phrase for danger was "It's snowing in Chicago." He didn't know English, but he repeated that phrase over and over again, laughing each time.

The next morning, we got ready for the Peace Mass. A group of about 50 campesino families met us with white flags and walked with us down the street to the church. The priests had told us that they didn't expect many to attend, maybe a hundred. But, as we walked, we noticed more and more people going in the same direction, and when we reached the church, it was standing room only. Over a thousand people were there.

The church was cool, with pink marble walls, and statues of the Virgin holding a baby. The bishop and priests were resplendent in their white robes and colorful stoles, and above their heads someone had made a silvery wire banner that read, "Sembramos La Paz", "We Sow Peace". Sunlight dropped like a blessing through the windows. Children ran back and forth up the steps to the altar. A couple of small dogs trotted around the aisles.

Another priest, Padre Campo, the main organizer of the service, and one of the most outspoken, gave a fiery homily. "Our God is a God of Life", he said. "We defy the forces which work against Life." His eyes flashed as he looked out at the sea of faces in front of him. "We will not let violence and fear destroy us. We know there are members of armed groups in our town. We know you are out there. We know you can hear us. Listen to us now! Stop the killing! Join us in working for peace." His words were broadcast over the radio to the whole valley of Sibundoy.

The priests began the liturgy for the Eucharist. As they lifted up the chalice, I thought of Oscar Romero in El Salvador, shot down while performing the Mass. I thought of Padre Acide, a friend and mentor of the priests in front of me now, who had been killed five years before, not far from Sibundoy, shot down while saying Mass. His crime had been speaking out against drug trafficking and helping the people grow alternative food crops. I saw the priests in front of me, bravely standing before the crowd, and I realized that this Eucharist, this communion, was also an act of spiritual resistance.

The people came forward to receive the Mass, old, young, campesino, store owner, indigenous grandmother, government official. When the service ended, our group was engulfed by people who wanted to welcome us. But as I was laughing with some tiny indigenous women, I was tapped on the shoulder. It was our delegation leader. "It's snowing in Chicago.," she said. "Go to the back of the church and stand with the group. Go as quickly as you can."

Apparently, Padre Raoul and Marta had seen men on the steps of the church who were known to be with the paramilitaries. They appeared to be waiting for us to leave. Raoul and Marta had quickly found our leaders and used our code phrase to let them know we could be in danger. We called our bus driver on a cell phone, and he drove right up to the steps of the church. People still milled around us, innocently offering us their well wishes. An old woman gave us apples.

We stood tightly together and then walked out into the bright sunshine. As we crossed the open space to the bus, I thought of how vulnerable we were at that moment. I looked around at the men lounging on the steps nearby watching us and had a brief taste of fear, of what it must be like to live like this all the time, a target of violence. I thought of the people I had embraced, of the priests who had spoken. I was leaving; they were not. Fortunately, we were able to drive away without incident and returned to our hotel.

The next day, our final morning in Putumayo, we had a time of prayer and reflection in the courtyard of the church where Padre Campo directs his Pastoral Services work. Some of the priests joined us for devotionals. On our final morning, Greg, one of the youngest members of our group, asked us to find a partner. I was sitting next to Padre Campo, and so he and I turned to each other.

Greg asked us to look into the eyes of our partner and think about what that person's life must be like. I looked into dark brown eyes filled with kindness and pain. I saw unspeakable sadness and deep compassion. And I saw courage of a kind I had never seen before. This man knew he could die any day. But his love was stronger than his fear.

My eyes filled with tears. His did, too. The tears spilled down my cheeks. Padre Campo reached into his pocket, took out a neatly folded handkerchief, and wiped my eyes. I could not stop weeping.

After we finished a short time of silence, Padre Campo read the scripture that the priests had selected for that morning. It was the same text that we heard read this morning, the two friends walking the road to Emmaus. "This is one of my favorite passages", Campo said. "It speaks to us of hope. The road to Emmaus is one of sadness. We think there is only death and despair."

I was reminded of what Frederick Buechner had written about this story:

(Emmaus is)...the place we go in order to escape....Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had- ideas about love and freedom and justice- have always in time been twisted out of shape...
(The Magnificent Defeat, Seabury: New York, 1966, 85-86).

"But," Padre Campo said, "Christ comes to us on this road of sadness, as he always does. Christ is our traveling companion, the one who walks with us, shares our bread, and gives us hope. Our souls are resurrected over and over again, and death does not have the final say."

Padre Campo Elias De la Cruz. I have walked with you for awhile on the dusty roads of Sibundoy, and I have looked into your eyes and seen God. May you, and Raoul, and Marta, and all those who raise their voices against violence be kept safe. And may we all be blessed by sacred strangers who meet us on the road, who break bread with us, and then look into our eyes and break open our hearts.

AMEN.