

## “But We Had Hoped...”

Rev. Debra Phillips Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Psalm 116

Luke 24:13-35

When Tom and I were first married 35 years ago, neither of us was employed. And we would walk down to the Village and play fiddle and guitar and sing, with a hat on the sidewalk in front of us for donations. We didn't make much money. On the best night, I think we made about \$30. But we weren't really doing this for the money. Mostly it was a fun adventure and exhilarating to put ourselves out there and interact with the public. One evening we came home and sat on the stoop of our apartment building, counting our collection after playing music and talking with strangers. And Tom remembers me saying I felt I learned something about Christianity that night.

Last week the Sunday Times had an article titled “Hello Stranger.”\* Did any of you read it? It's about how interacting with strangers can increase our sense of happiness. Most of us are taught from childhood, “Never talk to strangers.” And these days many people won't even make eye contact. I've found that if you walk down the street in Leonia, at least three quarters of the people you pass won't even give you a chance to nod hello. They walk right past you staring at the ground.

“Never talk to strangers” may be a good rule for children, and as adults we also have to be careful. It's a way to survive in this crowded and busy part of the world. But if we always keep to ourselves, we miss out. The article cited several studies to demonstrate. In one, commuters in a Chicago train station were recruited to participate in a simple experiment during their train ride. One group was asked to talk to a stranger, anyone who sat down next to them on the train that morning. Other people were told to follow standard commuter norms and keep to themselves. By the end of the train ride, commuters who talked to a stranger reported having a more positive experience on the train than those who sat in solitude.\*

Why would that be? When people interact with strangers on the internet, they sometimes feel free to be nasty or rude. But when we interact with strangers in person, most of us tend to present our best selves. And when you present your best self and someone responds, you feel good about yourself. Also, when we have a real connection with a new person, however brief it may be, it opens up our world, and gives us a sense that we are part of something larger. And it can be an experience of grace, that someone unexpected will speak with us and not reject us.

We read with Jonathan this morning from Psalm 116, “I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice... because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.” People want to feel that someone is listening, that someone has heard them, whether it's a friend, a stranger, or God. It makes all the difference to know we are not alone, that someone out there understands.

This morning Joe read the story of Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus. Now Cleopas and his friend were walking in deep disappointment and sadness. They had put their hope in Jesus, that Jesus would make a difference in their world. They had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel, to save them from the brutality and oppression of Rome, and give them something to live for. But now that Jesus was dead,

their hope was gone. Their dreams were violently crushed. So they left Jerusalem and headed home.

While they walked, a stranger joined them and walked with them. It was Jesus, but they didn't know it was him. Jesus asked them what they were talking about and what had happened to make them so sad. And he listened. They poured out their disappointment and confusion and Jesus listened. And then he reminded them of what the scriptures said about the Messiah, and that suffering was part of the story. When they came to their town they urged this stranger to stay with them, inviting him into their home to share a meal. And when they broke bread together they suddenly realized who it was. It says "their eyes were opened." And then Jesus disappeared from their sight, and with him, their sadness and disappointment disappeared as well.

We all deal with sadness and disappointment at some point in life. You think you've beat cancer, but then it comes back. You lose your job and prepare for something new. But when you look for work, someone else always gets the job. You get married with dreams of happiness. But then your spouse decides to move out. Your loved one is finally conquering an addiction. But then they relapse. You dare to hope, and then life comes crashing in on you. And in the end we all suffer and die. But if in these disappointments we experience God with us, we find something deeper to hope in.

In Jesus' day, people expected the Messiah to be a mighty ruler who would make life good. He would establish God's kingdom on earth and fix the world's problems. When Jesus died an early and violent death many people concluded he couldn't be the Messiah. But Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah to start with. Instead he called himself "Son of Man." "Son of Man" can mean Messiah, the anointed one or savior. But it can also just mean "the Human Being." If Jesus was the Messiah, it was a very different kind of Messiah from what people were expecting.

Jesus did not come to fix the world's problems. Instead he showed us how to live as real human beings, and called us to walk in God's ways. In the midst of sin and evil, disappointment and death, Jesus showed the way of self-giving love. He walked with strangers and listened to them. And he opened people's eyes to God's presence.

Jesus walked with Cleopas and his friend through their long, sad and disappointed journey home. Finally, as they invited him in and he broke bread with them, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. And immediately he disappeared. He gave them a glimpse of God, and then vanished from their physical sight. But their eyes were still open, and they no longer needed this stranger in the same way.\*\* They picked up with energy and courage, and went right back to Jerusalem to tell their friends what had happened on the road.

Cleopas said, "We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel." But instead of redeeming Israel, Jesus came back and gave Cleopas power to witness to God's presence, and to love and help others find hope in God. And he gives us that same power. Are we using it?

The book of Hebrews (13:2) says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." You never know when a stranger might reveal God's presence to you. Or you might be that stranger to someone else, the person who walks a ways with someone, and by their presence lets them know that God is there. And who knows, you might even entertain Jesus himself in the stranger you welcome into your life for a short time.

What did I learn about Christianity by playing music on the street with Tom? It's not that we saved any souls, or had any deep meaningful conversations with anyone. But I put myself in a place where I could experience spontaneous connections and unexpected exchanges. And I discovered the joy of sharing moments of life with lots of different people. There's a lot more to Christianity than that. But if I want to share God's presence with a stranger, it doesn't have to be a terrifying or oppressive experience. In fact it can be life-giving and exhilarating.

So when do we start? In two weeks we are hosting a garage sale to raise money for Children of Uganda, and hopefully lots of strangers will be coming and going to buy things. And the next day is Leonia Day in Wood Park, and Michael Sofia is threatening to set up a table for our church to let people know about us. These are both great opportunities to interact with the public.

And there are many more. After the announcements you will hear a Minute for Mission for the Loaves and Fishes Soup Kitchen at Bethany Presbyterian Church in Englewood, where some of our members cook and serve a hot meal every other Monday to anyone who shows up hungry. When we help shelter homeless families with Family Promise, or travel to Guatemala, we have a chance to interact with new people. When we go shopping or to a movie, walk the dog, or in the halls of our school or job, there are people we can exchange conversation with. And any interaction has the potential to transform lives. The object is not to convert people. But we can engage them. We can listen to them. We can walk with them for a brief minute and be open to the possibility of God opening our eyes.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

\* Dunn, Elizabeth and Norton, Michael, "Hello, Stranger," The New York Times, April 25, 2014 Sundayreview, Opinion.

\*\* credit to Gail A. Ricciuti, of Colgate Rochester Divinity School, "Preaching Luke 24:13-35" at Lectionary Homiletics, <http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=47>.