

This past Sunday I had a strange feeling in my heart at all three churches. As more and more people have been able to get vaccinated, we have seen so many people come back to church. We have even seen some new people pour into the doors of our sanctuaries and because of this I have found my heart strangely warmed. This is who we are as United Methodists. People who are in tune with what God is doing in the world so much so that when we feel the inbreaking of the kingdom of God our heart is strangely warmed.

As we look at our scripture today from Luke 24, we see that these two disciples of Jesus Christ had this same experience. The disciples were lamenting. They told their new “friend” the story of Jesus. How he had lived and died. How they had hoped that he was the Messiah. How some had said that he had risen from the dead. But they did not recognize Jesus.

It was not until Jesus broke the bread in front of them that their hearts were strangely warmed, and they recognized the resurrected Christ. Sometimes we also miss Christ’s presence, even when it is right there in front of us.

So often we live in the past or the future. We get stuck living in the past as we go in circles wishing we could change things that have already happened. We get stuck in the future wondering about the what if’s of life. God calls us to live in the present and be aware how Christ is at work.

In the breaking of the bread, the same action we see every time we have communion, Christ was made real to the disciples and their hearts were strangely warmed.

Have you ever had an experience like this? When it was undeniable that you were in the presence of Christ?

I experienced this feeling again this past Thursday night as our newest member Meggan Abboud led a Bible Study with six women joining in person and two joining through zoom and when numerous church people reached out to Jeff Thompson to let him know they were praying for him before his interview with the Board.

This week we are reminded that Christ is with us, through communion, through the Holy Spirit, in the act of Baptism and every time when two or more are gathered. But so often we miss it. Our Scripture for today calls us to open our eyes to the inbreaking of Christ’s reign all around us.

In our Old Testament Scripture from 1 Kings, we are reminded that God’s presence brings forth life when death was a certainty. Here we find a widow and her son. She is about to run out of food and so she prepares for her last meal before she dies.

Then this man shows up and asks her to make him something to eat. The audacity! And yet, when she does, she never runs out of bread or oil. Through the breaking of bread God saved the widow, but she almost missed it.

God often appears to us in ways that we do not expect. Just as the disciples along the way to Emmaus were not expecting to run into Jesus, we often miss when God shows up in our lives. Our hearts become strangely warmed, and we blame it on stress or indigestion.

Today we take a moment to look at the signs for when we are experiencing the inbreaking of God’s kingdom so we don’t miss it.

In Matthew 25 Jesus shares, “...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Our opportunities to meet Christ happen when we help those in need of care. But so often we miss these opportunities whether we are too busy or too scared to help a stranger. We miss the opportunity to really see all the people around us.

Some of this is cultural. We are programmed for achievement and success, and sometimes that means overlooking the things that are right in front of us. Other cultures seem to have this principle of being present ingrained within them.

In Africa, those who speak Zulu greet one another saying: “Sawubona” which means, “I see you.”ⁱ In this greeting the people convey that they “see your personality. [They] see your humanity. [They] see your dignity and respect. In the African village context, where everyone knows one another, it’s an exceedingly powerful representation of understanding.”ⁱⁱ

This is the way that Jesus greeted people. Being the Son of God, he knew them. He knew their gifts and their struggles. He looked beyond their eyes into their souls calling them to fully live and strive in the promise of new life.

What would it look like if we greeted each other this way? If we took a little more time to listen and ask questions so that we would more deeply know the people around us. This is what happens as we grow in our discipleship. We grow in our desire to know God more and to journey with the Body of Christ.

As we continue on in this third week of Easter, we are still celebrating the resurrected Christ. After these two friends recognized Christ they told their friends “...Christ has risen indeed...(Luke 24:34).

We experience holiness of life when we embody this truth with our lives. These are the ways we enact our faith. We embody holiness of life when we love our neighbors more than ourselves.

In our communion liturgy we too experience again the breaking of the bread, symbolic for the same way Christ broke his body so that we may have new life. At the end of the communion liturgy we hear this blessing: “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us...and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In this moment of breaking the bread and blessing it we become the body of Christ for the world. We take on the mission of Jesus Christ, the mission to share that we too have seen the resurrected Christ alive and well in the world.

I see the resurrected Christ through the ministry of Darcy and the Senior Center, through Rosa Crocker and her mask ministry and through Mimi Forbes and the Rappahannock Food Pantry.

We become witnesses of the resurrected Christ when we really see the people that God has placed in front of us, and we respond.

The good news for our lives today is that God’s kingdom is inbreaking all around us, if only we would notice it.

So how can you take a moment to see how Christ is working in your life? How can you stop to see if your heart is strangely warmed?

There he sat at a meeting at Aldersgate in London, feeling like a fraud. The founder of our denomination. This wasn’t the first time he had this feeling. The last time he felt like this he was on a boat with a bunch of Moravians. When a bad storm came up, he feared for his life, while they were without fear and continued to worship God.

One if someone found out he was a fraud? Would they lose their faith in Christ? He couldn’t understand how he got to this point. Surely, he had put the time in, he was faithful.

He practiced personal holiness. He journaled every one of his sins and asked for God’s forgiveness. He confessed these sins to his friends and was prayed over. He prayed for others. He loved the Bible and studied every word of it. He read other books about holiness so that he could embody even more practices to become more holy. He fasted twice a week and arose early to worship.

He practiced holiness of life. With his friends in college, he visited prisons, received communion, and made connections with people in the community. Every moment of his day was devoted to serving God.

So why did he have this feeling of impending doom? Even his little brother Charles had come to feel faith in his heart. But he had not. What was wrong with him?

So, he sat there defeated, yet still hoping for God to work in him. He was searching and that is why he showed up at a church service at Aldersgate that night.

It wasn’t that John Wesley didn’t believe in God; in fact, the opposite was true. He dedicated his entire life to God and served in every way humanly possible. The problem for him is that he did not feel that God had saved him in his heart.

He understood in his mind how this occurred. He could explain this concept theologically and preach it to others. He could cite countless Scriptures proving that God loved him and that through his faith in Christ he was saved...but he wasn’t feeling it.

For me hearing about this experience John Wesley had, this crisis of faith, gives me solace, it shows that even the best leaders have moments when they cannot rely on themselves and must put their trust in God.

Then something happened...as Wesley listened to someone read “Luther’s Preface on the Epistle to the Romans...[he] felt his heart strangely warmed.”^{iv} Just like the disciples on the way to Emmaus Wesley was finally able to make the connection of faith between his head and heart and he was forever changed.

This was the most important moment in John Wesley’s life, and it led to a revival of his faith and it led him to continue to form the people called Methodists. I often wonder what would have happened if John Wesley just gave up. One if he became so disillusioned and so burned out that he left the ministry and simply did something else? So many people would have missed out on hearing about God’s grace from him.

It can seem like a great feat to become attuned to the movement of God in our lives, and yet, when we immerse ourselves in prayer, in reading the Bible, and in serving others we will also experience our hearts being strangely warmed. As God continues to invite us to serve, may we always have time to stop and see all that God is doing and give thanks that we have been invited to serve beside Christ. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/glen-pearson/africa-famine_b_922063.html#:~:text=Sawubona.,%2C%20%22I%20see%20your%20personality.

ⁱⁱ https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/glen-pearson/africa-famine_b_922063.html#:~:text=Sawubona.,%2C%20%22I%20see%20your%20personality.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The United Methodist Hymnal.” United Methodist Publishing House. Nashville, TN. 1989. P. 14.

^{iv} Adam Hamilton. “Revival.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2014. P. 70

Additional Resource

Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Commentary of the Bible. Vol. XII. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 1995.