Hearts Strangely Warmed  

Lucy of *Peanuts* cartoon fame, is pictured with a look of discouragement on her face, as she questions, “Do you think that life has any meaning when you have failed nine spelling tests in a row, and your teacher hates you?” I suspect that most of us, for very different reasons, have experienced our own times of despair - a time when it feels as if all of life is falling in upon us. Surely, each of us has known times of anguish and despair, times when we have felt all alone, times of confusion and pain.

Our Scripture lesson from Luke, chapter twenty-four, describes two disciples of Jesus walking a seven-mile stretch of road from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. The story is not one for the fainthearted, even though it begins with Cleopas and his unnamed friend restrained by disillusionment and regret. The two who were followers of Jesus feel as though all of life is crushing down upon them since the aftermath of his death. Jesus, the one on whom they had staked their futures, the one whom they had believed to be Israel’s Messiah, is dead - killed by the power of the state, a cruel death on a cross. It was a time of oppressive hopelessness, a time to let go of their dreams, a time to return to business as usual - to life as they knew it before Jesus entered the scene.

Why the two followers of Jesus chose Emmaus, we do not know. Perhaps it was their home stomping ground, prior to embarking upon a life of discipleship. Perhaps the two had no real destination in mind at all; they simply started walking, lost in their confusion and pain.

In the minds and hearts of the two walkers, Jesus had indeed failed. Drawn to Jesus, Cleopas and his friend had taken the risk of believing that a new world was emerging, that there was much more to life than what could be seen and experienced on the surface. The two had dared to trust that forgiveness, healing and love are more than idle pipe dreams; they had trusted forgiveness, self-giving love, and new life as realities that could touch us, heart and soul, here and now. When they lived with Jesus, the two were
free to shift from life as burden, to life as challenge and opportunity. As Henri Nouwen writes in his book *With Burning Hearts*, “Jesus made their life into a dance!”

But their dancing days are now over, or so they think. And yet, as I said earlier, this story is not for the fainthearted, nor for the cowardly. Because almost before they know it, the two disciples find themselves ready to dance again, ready to get back into the fray as they discover that their hope had not been misplaced after all. As the “stranger” breaks bread and blesses it, the eyes of the two disciples are opened and all of life is transformed. They recognize that it is the risen Jesus who has been with them on the road, and even when Jesus vanishes from their sight, they can scarcely contain their excitement. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” they question.

John Wesley spoke of his experience of encountering the grace of God firsthand as a time when his heart was strangely warmed. “Burning hearts”, “hearts strangely warmed” - are these not indications of an Easter power and presence within us, the gift of the risen Christ’s Spirit? “Burning hearts”, “hearts strangely warmed” - these are hearts ablaze with the promise of resurrection and new life, with the good news that fear and death do not have the final word, that love is stronger than hatred, that peace is indeed a possibility.

Hearts strangely warmed, the two disciples found their hopelessness transformed into hopefulness, their dejection giving way to excitement and new possibilities. The formerly bedraggled disciples now make an unexpected round trip, a U-turn, as they rush back to Jerusalem to tell their fellow disciples what they have experienced. Whereas their trek from Jerusalem to Emmaus was a long and frustrating journey, their return trip is altogether different. A new clarity, a new determination, a new sense of urgency and life fills their strangely warmed hearts.
Martin Luther King, Jr., lived among us as prophet and visionary, as spiritual guide and national leader, as man of courage and conviction, as one who had his own experience of a heart strangely warmed. As the days of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama unfolded and the African American community united in its refusal to accept the demeaning status quo that forced them to the rear of the bus, resistance to King’s leadership and movement grew. King found himself the target of a steady barrage of threatening and obscene phone calls, and one night, after yet another late-night call threatening his life and that of his family, Martin Luther King found himself unable to sleep, nerves frayed and on edge, exhausted and fearful, crying out to God,

*I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.*

And in the quiet of his kitchen, King felt a resurgence of energy and an inner peace. A voice from the depths of his being seemed to be saying to him, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever.”

Call it what you will - the reality of the living God, the Spirit of the risen Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit - whatever name we give it, it was for King a time of empowerment, a time of re-strengthening for the ministry before him, a time of his heart being strangely warmed.

How often, at the seemingly bleakest moments of life, the unexpected happens, and we feel restored. Hope and new life, new energy, come rushing back to us. The challenges before us do not vanish, but we find the courage to move forward. With the Emmaus Road disciples, we make a U-turn, an about face, and we find ourselves not just riding out the storms of life, but facing into those storms with courage and conviction.
John Muir was an early environmentalist who explored the western part of our continent, from the California Sierras to the Alaskan glaciers, observing, reporting, praising, and experiencing the beauty with childlike delight and mature reverence. One December day in 1874 Muir visited a friend who lived in a cabin, snug in a valley of one of the tributaries of the Yuba River in the Sierra Mountains - a place from which one could venture into the wilderness and then return to for comfort and rest. A fierce storm soon arose, one strong enough to bend the junipers, pines, and fir trees as if they were so many blades of grass. It was for just such a time as this that the friend’s cabin was built; what marvelous protection from the harsh elements it would offer. But Muir, instead of pulling the door tight behind him, placing another log on the fire, and wrapping himself in sheepskins to ride out the storm, strides out of the cabin into the storm, climbs a high ridge, and scales a giant Douglas fir in order to best view the colors and sounds, the scents and motions of the storm. Rather than waiting in comfort for the storm to subside, John Muir took it all in, holding on the fir tree for dear life, celebrating the wonder of God’s creation that includes the storm.

Eugene Peterson, creator of *The Message*, a contemporary paraphrase of the scriptures, shares that this story about John Muir is a favorite in his family, becoming something of an icon of Christian spirituality as his children were growing up. For the story serves as a reminder - to Peterson’s family and to us - that the life of faith and spirituality is not simply a matter of riding out the storms of life, but finding the strength to face them head-on, directly and courageously.

All too often our temptation is to content ourselves with a half-hearted religion that causes us to have an eye of caution toward life, while genuine encounter with the Spirit of God fills us with a new passion for living. With hearts strangely warmed by God’s Spirit, we find ourselves making a U-turn in life, heading in new directions, embracing new possibilities, living into life’s storms as we journey in faith. With the hymn writer of old,
we pray, “Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly, While the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is nigh.” We pray that prayer, trusting in the goodness of our God whose love is made visible to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. We pray the prayer, convinced that God is in the business of making all things new.

Surely this is what Martin Luther King, Jr. had in mind when writing,

*Faith in the dawn arises from the faith that God is good and just. When one believes this, one knows that the contradictions of life are neither final nor ultimate. One can walk through the dark night with the radiant conviction that all things work together for good for those who love God. Even the most starless midnight may herald the dawn of some great fulfillment.*

Sisters and brothers, now is the time to place our trust in the gracious love of Christ that will not let us go. Now is the time to open our eyes - and our hearts and our minds - to the One who, even now, would surprise us, just as the risen Jesus surprised those walkers on the road to Emmaus, just as the Spirit touched the broken Martin Luther King, Jr. in his kitchen one late night, filling him with new courage and conviction, just as John Muir found courage to face into the storms of life. May we find a similar courage and peace and presence that bring meaning to our lives. Amen.

**Prayer**

*O God of resurrection and new life, God of hope of promise, we come before you as we are this day . . . some of us broken and confused; some eager and hopeful; some burdened by life’s struggles and grief, yet anxious for new beginnings. In these moments, speak to us words of hope. Where we are discouraged, raise us up on eagle’s wings. Where we are experiencing brokenness, remind us that you do indeed hold us in the palm of your hands. Where we yearn for something more in life, touch our hearts anew and guide us into the living, loving presence of Christ Jesus, the Lord of all life.*
Thanks be to you, O God, for the wonder of a love that knows no limits. Thanks be to you, O God, for the beauty of creation, for the gift of changing seasons and the reminder that new life may well emerge our of darkness and death. Thanks be to you, O God, for the promise of another way of living.

Hear us, holy God, as we share our deep yearnings for peace - for peace in our hearts, granting us courage to walk through life’s storms, and for peace in our troubled world. We pray, O God, for peace wherever conflict simmers and threatens to overflow. We pray for the coming of that day when all peoples know that they are held in the palm of your hand, when justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Gracious Lord, you who are the source of living water, hear us now as we pray for those in special need of your healing touch. We place in your hands . . .

We pray for your church throughout the world - and in particular for the leadership of the Church of the Brethren, for deepened commitment to continuing the work of Jesus, peacefully, simply, together. In the name and spirit of Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

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