

HAVE YOU BEEN TO EMMAUS?

May 8, 2011

The news last Sunday evening was dramatic...it was sensational...it was even stunning. Osama bin Laden had been killed by our Navy SEALs at his compound in Abbotabad, Pakistan. We mostly know his name because he is the mastermind behind the terror of September 11th, but he was also the mastermind behind the bombing of the USS Cole in October of 2000, and the first attack in the underground parking garage of the World Trade Center in February of 1993. He has been our enemy for a very, very long time.

In the wake of the news last Sunday evening, we have responded as a nation in at least four ways. One way we have responded is in celebration...in jubilation. As soon as the news was announced, flags were waving and there were cheers and shouts at the White House fence because of his death. And I have to say, it felt a little too much (to me at least) like the Super Bowl rather than the defeat of a notorious terrorist. So we have celebrated.

There has also been criticism: what we could have done...what we should have done...and perhaps it would have made last Sunday come much sooner. The President's speech...Osama bin Laden's burial at sea...pictures of his body to be shown or not to be shown: and I began wondering if everything – everything in our public discourse – has to be partisan.

We've also responded with some cynicism, and you know the question: Is he really dead? So as the news media is telling us, the birthers have become the deathers. Is he really dead?

But the response that has moved me the most is the response of those who are the casualties of the terror that Osama bin Laden worked on us as a people: those folks who were directly affected by his reign...those who saw, and smelled, and felt, and tasted, and responded to the attack...the victims in New York city, at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania...and the firefighters...and the police officers...and the emergency responders...those people who lost family members, and friends, and co-workers because of the attack nearly 10 years ago...those children who are growing up without parents today...people who live without their siblings...without their loved ones. Their response in the wake of this news has been somber, and sober, and subdued; and my heart has been moved by that...by the scenes from Ground Zero that is now holy ground where people went with great dignity to remember and there to tell the stories of their experience, the stories of their loss.

You know, telling stories...telling stories is one very significant way that we as people grieve. It's a way for us to cope. It's the way we come to terms with our trauma. It's the way we work at healing broken hearts.

Have you done that? Have you told stories of your own grief...the stories of how your hearts have been broken? Have you ever done that to process what you've experienced? I have. I have told the story of my Mom's illness and death, and many of you know it. But the story I have most often told is the story of my friend, Jim, who died 35 years ago of suicide. We tell stories to deal with our grief, to heal our hearts.

On Easter, Cleopas and a companion were walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Cleopas and his companion were two disciples. Now, they're not disciples whose names we

know so very well. Perhaps these disciples had joined Jesus' little band as late as Holy Week after He'd come to Jerusalem, after they'd heard what He taught and saw what He did. Maybe they were fresh, brand new disciples of Jesus. But they were disciples. And, so as they walked on Easter Day from Jerusalem to Emmaus...those seven miles...they talked, and they told stories. They told stories about what had happened to their Master.

And as they walked...and as they talked...and as they told their stories, they were joined by a stranger on that Emmaus Road. And the stranger asked them the most natural question in the world. He asked:

What you talking about?

And they answered:

Jesus! Jesus! Yes, Jesus: a prophet who was mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. Jesus, He's the one the chief priests and the leaders handed over to Rome to be crucified and we...we had hoped He would redeem Israel! And now this day...this very day...some women in our group tell us that they had a vision of angels at His tomb and that He's alive!

The stranger listened, and then He took their story...their story of grief...and began to set it in the context of the story of scripture. And as He did, their confusion and the senselessness of what had happened began to take on order and meaning.

As the sun was setting, the three of them arrived at Emmaus. The stranger made motions as if He was going on down the road, but Cleopas and his friend didn't want Him to leave. So, they begged Him to stay. They said to Him: ***Abide with us, fast falls the eventide...*** We just sang it. And the stranger acquiesced, and He stayed with them in Emmaus.

And then, as they sat down to their evening meal, an amazing thing happened. Cleopas and his friend had invited this stranger to be their guest. And He accepted. But then He became their host. He took the bread, and He blessed it, and He broke it, and He gave it to them. And, when He did, their eyes were opened and they recognized that this stranger was their risen Lord. This was Jesus in their midst! But, as soon as they knew who it was that was their host, He vanished from their sight.

Well, at that very instant, Cleopas and his friend gathered themselves together and they ran the whole seven miles straight back to Jerusalem from whence they'd just come...and they ran all the way through the middle of the night...and when they got there, they found the other disciples and they told them. They said: ***Our hearts burned within us when He interpreted the scriptures for us on the road. And then, at the table, He was known to us in the breaking of the bread.***

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They knew Him in the breaking of the bread. Why? Why did they know Him that way? Well, maybe it's because they remembered the Last Supper not so many days before and His words at that meal: ***This do in remembrance of me.*** Maybe that's why they recognized Him in the

breaking of the bread. Or maybe it's because His life was a life of bread that's blessed, and broken and given. You know, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Do you know what Bethlehem means? It means *the house of bread*: a life of bread, blessed, and broken and given.

We usually assume that it's because of the first reason – *Do this in remembrance of me* – but, you know, I think it was the second...because Jesus' whole life was about blessing, and breaking, and giving to those around Him.

When we bless, and break and give bread to one another, Jesus is among us. Jesus becomes real. When we bless, and break and give bread to welcome the stranger to make the stranger our guest, then Jesus becomes our host and we are welcomed and included and fed and loved. Peter says it this way:

Now that you have been purified by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.

Very simple words: *Love one another deeply from the heart*. That, friends, is the ministry of Emmaus. It is the ministry of bread that is blessed, and broken, and given. Or as Peter says it: *This word is the good news that was announced to you*. This word is bread: bread that is blessed, and broken, and given. It's a ministry so simple because it's a ministry of food, and hospitality, and home...the simple, sublime gifts of this life...the homes that are made for us in our mothers' love.

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There are two great traditions in American churches, in the architecture of our churches. One of those traditions is the architecture of this building. It is an altar. It's an altar where we offer our sacrifices to God because of the sacrifice our God has made on the cross for us. So we have an altar, and we have it because it fits the architecture of this room, and because it's pretty.

But the table – we keep it over there when we're not using it – the table is really where the heart of our theology rests in our tradition because the table is where we meet our Lord as we share bread that is blessed, and broken, and given. Its inspiration...the inspiration of the table...is Emmaus. You see, because of Emmaus, all tables are now sacred: tables where bread is blessed, and broken, and given...tables where no guest is refused a seat.

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The Heifer ARK Plaque that we received celebrates two ARKS that this church gave through Heifer International for a hungry world last Christmastime. Two ARKS! That now makes the total number of ARKS since we began building ARKS in this church in 1995 twenty-four...twenty-four ARKS in the last sixteen years. And you know what ARKS are, don't you? They are God's love that is known in blessing, and breaking, and giving...in animals that are the sustainable difference between starving and thriving for God's children.

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In 1850, some of our German immigrant forefathers that are a part of the history of the United Church of Christ – immigrant pioneers – founded a seminary to prepare pastors for their frontier churches. And they did that...this seminary founding...on a farm near a little Missouri village named Marthasville. They put it on a farm because, after all, how would you feed the seminarians if you didn't have cows and pigs and chickens in 1850?

In 1883, the seminary picked itself up and moved to a St. Louis suburb named Wellston. The streetcar stop closest to the seminary was named Eden; hence the seminary got its name from the streetcar: Eden Theological Seminary. But, these frugal Germans also realized that, in leaving Marthasville for Wellston, they had abandoned a perfectly good resource in Marthasville. What in the world should they do with it? Well, they took that abandoned campus and they made it into a home...a home for God's developmentally disabled children. In 1893, that home welcomed its first resident. And they gave that home a name. They called it *Emmaus*. Why? Because Jesus is known there in the very simple act of blessing, and breaking, and giving bread...the necessities of life...the life-giving grace of meeting physical needs.

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You see, friends, Jesus enters our lives...He walks with us...He listens to our stories...and then He feeds us as Word becomes Bread. Remember: *And he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

Emmaus, you see, is wherever bread is blessed, and broken, and given in Jesus' name. And when it is, scripture becomes real, and we live because Jesus lives.

HAVE YOU BEEN TO EMMAUS?

Emmaus is the story that God gives us to tell. It's not a story of grief; it's a story of grace. It's not a story of death; it's a story of life. It's not a story of loss; it is a story of love. This is the story that heals. This is the story of our living, life-giving Lord.

In Peter's words:

Now that you have been purified by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.

Loving one another deeply from the heart: that's what it means to go to Emmaus! Amen.

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