

The Practice of Recognition

by

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Luke 24:13-35

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” ¹⁹He asked them, “What things?”

They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”

²⁵Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”

²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.

²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

“It takes practice” we say of things worth doing well. It takes practice to learn math, for example; you have to do those problems over and over again with different numbers. It takes practice to try a case before a courtroom, to make a diagnosis, to deliver a good lecture, to perfect your golf swing, to play an instrument. “It takes practice,” we say, of things worth doing well, and that is also true of recognizing the presence of God in our midst.

In all of the gospel resurrection appearances of Jesus there is a moment of recognition: in the garden when Mary hears the Risen Jesus call her by name, behind locked doors when Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds, on the beach when Jesus tells the disciples to cast their nets to the right side of the boat, and they haul in the catch of a lifetime. In the confusion of getting back to an ordinary life after such a profound loss as the death of Jesus, the disciples have a precise moment of recognition when the Risen Christ appears to them.

In today’s much-loved story of the couple walking to Emmaus, we are again given a moment of recognition. But Luke gives us something else, too. This resurrection story offers a pattern of recognition – something to practice in order to experience what those early followers of Jesus saw. Around an ordinary table, in an ordinary home, over an ordinary meal, Luke says, “When he was at table with them, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” Jesus’ appearance at the home in Emmaus gives us a pattern, something for us to repeat over and over again, and in so doing, come to our own recognition of the Risen Christ. As Fred Craddock put it plainly, “Table fellowship is of profound importance as the occasion for experiencing the presence of Christ.”¹

I imagine most of us left worship last Sunday, to gather around a table, to appreciate each person in each chair, to give thanks to God, and

¹ Fred Craddock, *The Gospels*, p. 117.

to pass the bread because we intuitively, spiritually that at table, laden with abundance from the good earth, God is palpably present.

When Jesus, at table with fellow travelers, took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, he was not making up a new communion ritual for the feast of resurrection. The fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing comes from an ancient Jewish table blessing in two basic movements: a vertical movement of thanksgiving to God, and a horizontal movement of sharing bread – a basic necessity of life. Perhaps most recognizable in table fellowship, this is actually the pattern and practice intended for every aspect of discipleship. Praise God and pass the bread; give thanks to God and house the homeless; worship in glory and splendor and work for peace and justice in the world; love God and love neighbor. It takes practice to enact our vertical relationship with God by the horizontal dimension of Christian service, but in so doing, we learn to recognize the living presence of the Risen Christ.

As Barbara Brown Taylor wrote: “From the first articulations of the faith, early Christians spoke of the resurrection of the *body* – not only because some believed they had seen the Risen Christ in the flesh, but also because they believed God meant to raise their own flesh too. Wherever they were going with God, their bodies were going too... Why else” she asks, “did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, Jesus did not give them things to think about when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do, specific ways of being in their bodies together, practices that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them.”²

After he was gone, they would still have God’s word, but that word was going to need some flesh. So Jesus gave them things they could get

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Practicing Incarnation: Becoming God’s Easter People,” *The Christian Century*, April 5, 2005.

their hands on. Jesus gave them things to do. Whenever and wherever the pattern of thanksgiving to God and sharing with others occurs, the living Christ will show up. The more we practice the faith; the more we will come to recognize God with us.

James Kay, Emeritus Professor at Princeton seminary commented on this aspect of the meal at Emmaus: “This pattern is not only the shape of Christ’s presence among us, it is also the shape of the Christian life... Praising God and passing the bread – these are the marks of the people of God. In this practice of thanksgiving and sharing, our Lord comes on the scene.”³

On Easter last Sunday, we were thrilled to have over a thousand people join us for in person worship during the outdoor sunrise and two sanctuary services – the most folks on the church campus since Christmas Eve, 2019. The challenge before us now is to get back into practice of being the church together. To get back in the habit of doing the good work of the gospel together in ministries of service, compassion and outreach.

My friend and pastoral colleague, Camille Cook, at Georgetown Presbyterian Church in Washington shares how the work of a popular podcast on mental toughness can be illuminating for the work of the church in this particular time. James Clear, the best-selling author of *Atomic Habits* describes a concept he calls the two-minute rule. When we try to form or recover good habits, we should not focus on the finish line, but on getting to the starting line. Clear says to think of the first two minutes as the entrance ramp to a behavior. We need to figure out how to automate the behavior. For example, if we want to write every day then we go to a favorite chair, silence the phone and write for two minutes.

³ James Kay, *Seasons of Grace*, “The Pattern of Recognition,” p. 64, with thanks for the title for the sermon and insight into the text.

There we will have started small, really small. But the end effect is we are beginning to practice, to form a habit. Or automate your running by putting on your running shoes, stepping out the front door and locking it behind you. Just barely beginning, we signal our brains and build momentum toward any activity. The two-minute rule.

My friend Camille applies this rule to reengaging our Christian practices as we begin to return to church life. She writes: if the finish line of being a Christian is someone who talks about God to friends, who enjoys worship in beauty and in truth, feels connected to God in prayer, rests on the Sabbath, fasts, gives alms, serves the poor and works for justice; and if becoming more Christian means trusting that in God all things work together for good, that the Risen Christ is a present companion, that we are called to follow Jesus every day; well, then that list sounds intimidating and overwhelming. How about taking some smaller steps to re-engage your discipleship now that we are coming back into communion with one another? How can we automate the first two minutes of each day to being a Christian in word and deed, and then see what happens the rest of the day? ⁴

In a few minutes when we celebrate the Ordination and Installation of new Elders and Deacons, they will be asked some huge questions such as:

Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?

They are not called to do that in isolation. They are assuming roles of servant leadership with everyone who makes up the body of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. They are committing to join together with this church family – to follow Jesus Christ, and to work for the Kingdom of God.

⁴ Paraphrased from Camille Cook Howe, “How to be a Christian (a refresher course)” 3/13/22, Georgetown Presbyterian church, Washington, DC.

Friends, we will never reach that finish line. But every single one of us can begin our day practicing the two-minute rule Jesus provides for us at Emmaus. We bless our bread and then we share it. We give thanks to God and serve those in need. We always make sure the vertical dimension of our faith goes hand in hand with the horizontal.

We love God; we follow the Risen Christ and we practice resurrection, working together for the reconciliation of the world.

AMEN.