

Luke 24: 13-35

April 14, 2024

More than thirty years ago now, during the weeks before Gardner and I were to become a married couple, my then-therapist gave me a copy of an article: “Why Falling in Love Will Break Your Heart.” I’ve misplaced it over the years, but I recall its central message: that one of the hard truths about human relationships is that they all someday come to an end. Perhaps this seems like a downer to give an excited soon-to-be-bride, but its message, which my therapist clearly thought I was ready for, stayed with me: treasure what you have in the present, for more than likely one of you will be alone at some point. This doesn’t mean, of course, relationships are to be avoided. Our Lenten 1Book1Diocese reading selection, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, gives eighty years of data to show that relationships and the human interconnection they offer are key to finding “the good life” on this earth.

While our culture tends to privilege romantic relationships in terms of importance and attention, all relationships contribute to the life satisfaction *The Good Life* describes. Friendships, especially close ones, are also vital for maintaining a sense of connectedness. I’ve been blessed with strong friendships, some of which have lasted more than forty years. I treasure my friends and grieve deeply over several who’ve passed away the last few years. Such losses help me remember to express love regularly to the friends who add so much to my life.

We perhaps don't often think of Jesus in terms of his friendships, but isn't that a way to view his relationship with the apostles and other followers? We know he was deeply attached to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, for instance. From the reactions to Jesus' death, it is clear his companions loved him deeply. Some were relatives, but others were that type of relation you get to choose for yourself: friends. It isn't surprising, then, that on the road to Emmaus two friends of Jesus, Cleopas and one other, were "talking with each other about all these things that had happened." No doubt they were grieving over Jesus, of course because of the horror of a death by crucifixion, and because they had lost a friend. When they encounter the risen Jesus on the road, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him," and they are astounded that this stranger has not heard of the things that happened in recent days. They tell of Jesus' condemnation and death, noting how important he was to them: "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

They move on to share the astounding news reported earlier to them: that the body was gone from the tomb, and the women tending the tomb had seen "a vision of angels who said that he was alive." Other men had confirmed that the tomb was empty. At this Jesus, still incognito, chastises his walking companions for being "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" Then their relationship develops into one of teacher, or perhaps mentor, and learners, for "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." They continue walking together until nearing the village, but when Jesus starts to depart near the end of the day, the two travelers urge him to stay with them. They have already built a bond through which they wish to remain in the company of this former stranger, now a companion, a friend?

The rapid development of this friendship brings to mind what I consider to be one of my greatest compliments. When I first met my father-in-law, on a visit with Gardner to Kentucky a few months before our 1993 wedding, we sat outside together sharing beers and talking for about an hour. At the end of that time, my future father-in-law said to me, “I feel like I’ve known you a long time already.” Surely this must be the way Cleopas and his companion felt after spending less than a day in the company of the risen Jesus, not realizing that they already had known him a long time already.

It is when they break bread together that Jesus reveals his identity to them, and then he disappears. Pondering this recognition, they remark to each other that “were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” I love that description of “our hearts burning within us,” which shows the power of Jesus’ words and the intimacy of their discussion. Their emotional reaction to their discovery is strong enough that they return to Jerusalem to “the eleven and their companions,” to their nest of friendship. There they hear others’ news and share their delight at their own rediscovery of their friend, Jesus, recognized “in the breaking of the bread,” that most hospitable of activities through which friendships grow. Likewise, Jesus offers us the ultimate gift of his friendship: eternal life. Here at last is a friendship, a relationship that will never end either on earth as “the good life” here, or beyond. What a friend we have in Jesus, indeed.

--Emily Rogers