

Faith: How the Love Gets In
April 26, 2020
The Rev. Scott Walters

On Good Friday we lingered for a bit in the silence of Jesus when Pilate asks, "What is truth?" He wouldn't... or at least he *didn't* give an answer. What I put forth in that sermon was that we humans tend to mistake explanations for the truth sometimes. Or maybe it's better said that we too often think the truth can be reduced to an explanation.

This was not a mistake Jesus seemed careful not to make. Not only before Pilate, but throughout his ministry, he spoke in parables and stories and sayings that took a simple question to a deeper level, or exposed the real motive in the asker, or even, according to the gospel of Mark, ensured that nobody would understand him.

And maybe he taught in this way because sometimes to be satisfied with an accurate explanation that doesn't get to the messier heart of reality is to live according to a half truth that can be more dangerous than an outright lie.

Here's another way into the idea. I once heard a philosopher named Alain de Botton say something that I repeat to nearly every couple I meet with for premarital counseling. He said adults in loving relationships (and I don't think this should be limited to marriage at all) should learn to treat each other a little more like children.

He didn't mean we should infantilize each other. He just meant that when a child storms into the living room and says, "I hate you!" any sane parent or grown up friend will not assume that this clear and forthright statement, one that is closely tied to the actual way the child feels about you in that moment, is the whole truth. No. With a child, you'll begin, quite generously if you're not in a really bad mood yourself, to play out all kinds of possible scenarios that might lead to such an outburst. Maybe he's anxious about starting preschool or maybe she's hungry or needs a nap.

Alain de Botton thinks we should give each other the benefit of the same doubt. Rather than accept at face value the outburst about how it really isn't that big a deal not to empty the grass clippings from the lawn mower every single time so couldn't you just lighten up a little! Just as a hypothetical example... Couldn't we go upstream a bit from these little dam breaks of emotion or unkindness and wonder if there might be more to the truth than what we just heard? After all, would you like to be held responsible for everything you ever said when you were really just in need of a sandwich or a nap? Or maybe in need of a global pandemic to go away? There's more to the truth than the transcript of our lives will tell, isn't there? And our relationships suffer when we forget or deny this.

I'm not here to re-preach a Good Friday sermon, even if, as someone said, it feels like it's April 79th, the 24th Sunday in Lent. But it occurs to me, reading the lovely, mysterious post-resurrection story of the walk to Emmaus, that faith, belief as Jesus talks about belief, is also not as simple as *accepting* a convincing explanation. Faith is about being drawn deeper into the truth of the way things are. Deeper, perhaps, into the truth of who someone truly is.

I've always been intrigued by the inability of people to recognize the risen Jesus. Maybe you have too. There's Mary Magdalene at the tomb, who, in John's telling, mistakes him for the gardener, but as soon as Jesus speaks her name, she recognizes him.

In Luke, the Emmaus story draws out this process of recognizing Jesus all the way through a seven mile walk and a dinner. But they share a similar shape, don't they? Recognizing Jesus, is not a simple matter of receiving accurate information and then accepting it as true. Seeing and believing are not the same thing. This kind of recognition is a murkier process. Well, until it's suddenly and mysteriously not.

It seems telling that Cleopas and his friend did not recognize Jesus while he explained the scriptures to them on the road to Emmaus. That's not where faith comes from. Faith came in a flash when Jesus blesses and breaks the bread at their table. And then he disappears. And when they remembered the way he had been teaching them along the road, after their eyes had been opened, they didn't say, "Of course! He explained how all this was supposed to work out! How could we have misunderstood?" No, they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" There was a deeper connection between their souls and his than an exchange of information about the way things are, marvelous as those things may be.

I think this story is telling us something essential about faith. Faith in God and faith in Jesus. But also the faith we need to cultivate in one another. Faith isn't about being convinced of the facts. Faith goes deeper down. Faith doesn't happen in the explanations along the road. Faith happens at the table, sharing a meal.

A Benedictine theologian I love named Herbert McCabe makes a helpful distinction. When we say, "I believe in God," or "I believe in Jesus" or "I believe in the resurrection," we can think it's the same kind of statement as, "I believe there are nine planets (even if I haven't counted them)" or "I believe in Australia (even though I've never seen it)." But "I believe in Jesus" is not that kind of statement at all.

It's more like, to use another example from childhood, a child's belief that her parents love her. This belief is almost as necessary as food and drink, as one who doesn't believe she is loved may well refuse to eat. So when someone talks about the saving effect of faith in Jesus, it's not about the kind of belief that Australia exists. It's not that God pulls a lever when we are convinced of the impossible fact that Jesus rose from the dead and grants us a mansion on a hillside after we die. As if we've won some cosmic game show. No, faith is that sustaining belief that we are loved. It is the starting place for a life of health and wholeness, not the result of accepting a convincing argument.

And what Herbert McCabe says then, and what I agree with completely is this: "The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us; I mean that there isn't anything else...Any proposition, any article of faith, [even that Jesus is risen], is only an expression of faith if it is a way of saying that God loves us." Full stop.

And herein lies the crux of the matter. The knowledge of love, whether the love of God or the love of another human being, is not something we work out on our own, weighing the evidence for and against our belovedness. It is a gift that gathers in us over time, isn't it? And, as the Emmaus story does not tell so much as show, the knowledge that we are loved by God is far more likely to come to us at a table sharing a meal than it is in the explanation on the way to dinner.

You may well fall in love with the explainer on the road beside you, but your heart won't burn within you just because what she says is logically convincing. It will have as much to do with the way she cocks her head peeling carrots or how he listens to you like you matter, or the quirky way she pronounces the town you're walking toward or a hundred other little somethings that are hard to name or quantify or assess, but that really are the way that the knowledge of love makes its way in.

At the culmination of the road to Emmaus story is the sense that this is also how the love of God comes to us in the risen Christ. Think about it. Jesus himself is walking along with you, and he interprets the mysteries of Moses and the prophets. But you don't come to know him in any of

that. You recognize him... you fall for him, really... at a meal, when bread is broken and a blessing said, and some of it is handed to you. Because love never really comes in by way of interpretations and explanations. It comes to us in all the little seemingly meaningless exchanges of everyday life that our relationships are actually made of.

It's hard to read this story right now, in part because that meal at Emmaus looks so much like a eucharist. That's where the lights come on for the two men. In the intimacy and the grace that comes to us when we share bread that's been blessed and broken, and wine served by a friend in Christ. And as beautifully and heroically as we have seen people transcend the limitations on our lives right now, so many of us are starving and parched for the shared meal that is eucharist and also for the common meals with friends and lovers from which its sacredness was derived. In other words, some of the essential ways love comes to us are not available to us right now.

We do well to admit this and to remember this. It's good to remember that the people around you are often doing their level best to get by, but doing so malnourished and cut off. They may need an extra measure of grace and forgiveness at times, even when we feel like we haven't got an extra measure to give.

And we also may need to be honest and gentle with ourselves about the deep need we have for human touch, for the sharing of meals, for communion, and for the million little unconscious exchanges where love gets into our lives. No amount of information will take the place of these. Not for embodied creatures like us. That we are hungry and thirsty and lonely for contact only means that we are still very much alive.

The only loving thing to do right now is to stay apart until it's safe enough to come together again. We have to do this with and for one another. And we'll manage, because we know that we won't have to live this way forever, even if it feels that way some days.

But it might not be too early to consider that we may need to help each other learn how to be close again when it's time. Our minds and bodies have been living in a world in which touch is first a potential source of infection. We may need to relearn together that even more essential truth that touch heals and food becomes a sacred source of divine love when it is shared.

The good news in this time in between — this time maybe not so different from that first Sunday evening when Good Friday was a fact and the resurrection was a rumor — the good news for us right now is that the longing we have for one another is a reminder that we were made for one another. And that you and I are the way God's love gets into other people's lives.

And, who knows, when we are together again and the world makes a little more sense, we may look back on this strange stretch of the road and say, "But remember the way our hearts were burning within us?" As if Jesus were in the midst of us, stirring our desire for communion with him and with each other, before we had eyes to recognize it was him.