

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight,
you who are our rock *and* our redeemer. Amen.

Burning Hearts

May 8, 2011

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 Psalm 116:1-4, 12-14, 16-19 1 Peter 1:17-23 Luke 24:13-35

Have you ever read anything by Oliver Sacks? He's the British neurologist who has written a number of best-selling books about strange tricks our brains can pull on us. I think the only one of his that I've actually read is The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat (1985), but his most recent is The Mind's Eye (2010), which is about various forms of blindness. For example, he writes about a famous pianist who late in life developed "visual agnosia." "She could recognize the tiniest letters on an eye doctor's chart, but couldn't read words or music." (Clendenin) Others suffer from "object agnosia," which means that although if tested their vision would be perfect, they can't recognize common objects like their own car. "Sacks himself has 'prosopognosia,' [pro-so-pag-NO-zha] the inability to recognize faces"—even sometimes his own, in a mirror.

We've all probably not noticed or recognized something or someone at times. I'm embarrassed to tell you that one time I didn't recognize my own daughter. She'd gone off to high school music camp for a couple of weeks, wearing baggy jeans and with her hair hanging in her face, and when I came for the final concert a lovely young woman in a skirt and heels, with a very attractive hair cut, came and sat next to me. Oh, shoot! It's Katie!

(Please tell me I'm not the only mother to ever fail to recognize her own daughter!)

Y'know, when we've got a picture in our heads of what something is like, of how the story is supposed to turn out, we don't always notice that something's changed. It's a classic twist in boy-meets-girl stories, isn't it? The boy is so busy chasing the blonde bombshell that he doesn't notice the girl next door who (it's clear to us as the audience) is the Right Girl for him.

Blindness comes in many forms!

The two people on the road in our gospel story are also blind, in a way. Here they are, walking along the road talking about Jesus ... and then talking *to* Jesus ... and they don't notice that he *is* Jesus. The text

says, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” And it may be that what kept their eyes from recognizing Jesus was that they were hung up on who they thought Jesus was going to be. “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel,” they told the stranger walking with them. In other words, they had hoped that he would be the Messiah they’d been looking for all these years, the one who would restore Israel to its former glory, the one who would throw off the rule of the Romans and bring the Israelites out of oppression.

They pretty much knew how God was supposed to be working this out. It’s what they’d been taught. It’s what their religion had been building up to for hundreds of years.

“We had hoped,” said Cleopas and his companion, “that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel.” Can’t you just hear them sighing?

And then they invited this stranger in for dinner, and “when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” And they recognized that their hearts had been burning as he spoke with them.

Out of this experience they came to understand that Jesus came not to redeem Israel, not in the narrow way they’d expected, but to redeem the whole world, in ways that they could not even begin to understand. As it says in the letter to the Colossians, in Christ God had “reconciled to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, all things visible or invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities” (1:16-20).

I think we’re not unlike those two believers walking along the road. We too have learned certain expectations of how God will work in our world. And we too have been known to say, “We had hoped.” Actually, “We had hoped” has become a common refrain in the Western Church these days, as church memberships decline, as more and more churches can no longer afford to pay a full-time minister, as more and more churches close.

- We had hoped that this new young minister would revive our membership and bring us back to the glory days of the 1950s and 60s, when everybody in town went to church.
- We had hoped that our new evangelism campaign would have brought in tons of young families.
- We had hoped that we’d be able to have a thriving youth group again.

- We had hoped that our children and grandchildren would be as regular in their church attendance as we have been all our lives.

Because isn't that the way it's supposed to be? Isn't that the way God is supposed to be working things out in the world?

But the warning of this story is that there may be times when, like the two people walking to Emmaus, we find ourselves talking about Jesus—in sermons and Bible studies and even during coffee hour—and talking *to* Jesus, in prayers alone and in church—but we may still be missing Jesus. We may be missing Jesus because we're so sure we know what he looks like, so sure we know who he is and what he wants, that our eyes are kept from recognizing him.

We may be missing Jesus because our understanding of him is too narrow. If we think that Jesus came for people who go to church every week, we're right. But if we think Jesus came only for people who attend regularly, or only for people who look like us and think like us, or only for people believe the right things and live the right kinds of lives ... then we may have too narrow a view of Jesus.

Have you noticed that the story of the walk to Emmaus is a story of a walking church service? When two or three are gathered in God's name ... Jesus is there with them, even though they don't recognize him. Scripture is interpreted, and then they gather around the table. And their eyes are opened.

I read this week of a memoir called *Take This Bread*, by a woman named Sara Miles.

Miles describes herself as a blue-state, secular intellectual, a lesbian, and a left-wing journalist who had developed habits of deep skepticism from covering revolutionary movements in Central America. Her parents were actively hostile to religion. But about ten years ago, Miles walked into Saint Gregory Episcopal Church in San Francisco, partook of the Eucharist [communion], and experienced a radical conversion. Before then she had never heard a gospel reading, never said the Lord's Prayer, and knew only one person who went to church. Today she is on staff at Saint Gregory, and author of a follow-up memoir: *Jesus Freak; Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead* (2010).¹

¹ Daniel Clendenin, "The Road to Emmaus: What Happened on the Way" May 2, 2011, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20110502JJ.shtml>

Who would have ever expected that such a woman's eyes would be opened in such a way, "merely" because she took communion?

Who would have expected that *our* eyes might be opened when we gather around the table, this morning and every Sunday morning here?

Let us pray that they *are* opened. Let us pray that we look around us, after sharing the bread and the cup, and say, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" Let us pray that Jesus is made known to us in the breaking of the bread.

Amen.