

REFLECTIONS FOR CRC ASSEMBLY “TED TALK”

Letting Go for Transformation

A journey, storytelling, and a meal – the Emmaus moment in Luke’s Gospel (24:13-35) speaks to religious institutes, to our Church, and to the world today in real and ordinary ways, yet in ways that are disturbing and comforting, unsettling and stabilizing, challenging and energizing.

There are three journeys in this narrative. The first is implicit: Mary and Cleopas had likely gone up to Jerusalem to join the crowds, waving palm branches and singing “Hosanna,” celebrating “Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. . . the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24:19, 21). Now, on their second journey, they return home to Emmaus – sad, grieving, dispirited, discouraged. All hope is gone.

A stranger joins them, and, despite their pain and sadness, they open their hearts to him, telling him how their world is shattering before them. The one whom they had celebrated with “Hosannas” has been crucified by the Jewish priests and leaders. To make matters worse, his tomb has been found empty. Some of the women disciples seem to think that this means Jesus is alive, but the male disciples have checked and conclude that this is not true.

Today’s spiritual teachers would say that, on this second journey, Mary and Cleopas have entered a liminal space in which they are experiencing the pain and chaos of losing everything that they have known or hoped for or dreamed. The stranger strongly encourages them to stay awhile in that liminal space as he tells them their own story embedded in their Hebrew Scriptures, a story born in the liminal spaces of exodus, exile, and desert wanderings. They hear their own story as if for the first time, sensing something new about it but still too dismayed to let it resonate in their hearts.

Writers who speak about liminal spaces note that “letting go” things that you hold closely and dearly is necessary for transformation. The liminal space gives time for deep listening, a moment when we are preparing to let go of what is but we are not quite ready yet to embrace the new, a time of emptiness but also of receptivity, a moment of preparation for the new that is emerging. Richard Rohr ofm says, “It is in these transitional moments of our lives that authentic transformation can happen.”

Within the liminal space of their second journey, Mary and Cleopas begin to let go. It seems that they have already let go their presence with the community of disciples whom they have left behind grieving in Jerusalem, and they have let go their trust in the experience of the women disciples. They remember the stories of Moses and the exodus and the wilderness wanderings, of the prophets and the exile, but they cannot see how this has any meaning in their present reality. It seems that they now have to let go their expectation that Jesus would be the Messiah, the redeemer of Israel. The dream has died. Their vision for a better future has disappeared. They are ready to accept that nothing will change for the better.

But, in this liminal space, they have also let go their mistrust of the stranger, inviting him to stay overnight in their home. It is in this last simple act of letting go, in radical hospitality, that the moment of transformation begins. When the stranger sits with them for supper, “He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight” (Lk 24:30-31).

Their real and their ordinary remain, but one new thing happens – a stranger has walked with them. And so, on their third journey, they return to Jerusalem and to the Twelve and their companions to confirm that, while they were moving within their liminal space, Jesus had told them their own story. They are hearing their own story with new ears, seeing it with new eyes, “They told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Lk 24:35).

Their real and their ordinary remain, but the stranger through storytelling and the breaking of bread has changed everything – their story and their shared meal, their hospitality to a stranger and their moment of joy in seeing their friend alive, their membership in the community of disciples, their trust in the women’s story! The meaning of their real and their ordinary has been re-shaped, reframed, renewed, transformed. Healing has happened. New relationship is born.

Today, we who live in religious institutes are journeying in a liminal space. We will surely not stop the decreasing of our numbers or the aging of our members. We surely cannot continue to govern and operate our sponsored ministries. We are surely becoming less able to lead our own congregations. The Emmaus story that was relevant to religious life up until the 1990s no longer teaches us anything. How could we ever have imagined or believed that the real and ordinary of our lives would cause our hearts to burn within us?

The United Methodist pastor, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, challenges us to hear the Emmaus story today in a new way as he describes its unfolding: “the long hollow walking, uttering loss,” “the mysterious accompaniment,” “the unravelling of known texts into unimagined questing,” “the bread, a body re-bodied anew,” “the sharing – absence made presence,” and “long ecstatic running.” In a prayer-poem, he reflects:

When there is shattered glass in my heart,
when the road is long and dull,
when the past has bent, the future vanished,
when I seem to walk from darkness toward darkness—
I pray not that the story be changed
but that my eyes be open to you,
here beside us, opening our eyes.

What role do leaders play in acknowledging that the real and the ordinary remain, but that welcoming the stranger opens our eyes and changes everything, that letting go is our way into transformation:

- letting go language about diminishment and completion; speaking with new life and hope,
- letting go dreams marked by victory; replacing them with dreams marked by inclusion,
- letting go walking away from grieving community; walking together with those most at risk,
- letting go a church that is exclusive and hierarchical; shaping a church that is inclusive and open,
- letting go controlling outcomes; growing into deep contemplative listening,
- letting go seeking perfection; resting in the surety of our brokenness,
- letting go always needing answers; rejoicing in living with the questions,
- letting go needing to know everything; trusting in communal discernment,
- letting go stereotyping and judging others; warmly welcoming diversity in all its ways,
- letting go always needing to prove we are right; calling forth healing and reconciliation,

- letting go wanting to be masters of Earth and Earth beings; becoming good and gracious guests of Earth,
- letting go our need as humans always to be at the centre; delighting in the sacred communion of all creation.

Every one of our congregations or provinces is presently living the Emmaus story, letting go by necessity and by choice. Is your community in the long hollow walking, uttering loss? Who is the stranger in your place, the one mysteriously accompanying you, opening your eyes, and causing your hearts to burn? What known texts are leading you into unimagined questing? With whom are you sharing ministry in new and renewing ways? How is your fear of absence – of persons or ministries or buildings – becoming presence in an unexpected way? Have you begun to run ecstatically back to Jerusalem because the Risen One has been made known to you in the word and in the bread, listening and eating together, two most visible ways of relating? How do you as leaders help the members of your community to softly shape the lament of letting go into the new music of hope?

Mary Wickham, a Sister of Mercy from Australia, says so poignantly:

And so, we ask ourselves in this strangest of years:

What are the old roads
that will enable the new music?
Where are the border crossings for creativity?
Who is crafting the new harps?
What is the new music?
Who is able to render the music
in meaningful sound?
For what and whom and where
do we play lament?
For what and whom and where
do we play glad song?
For what and whom and where
do we play lullaby?
What do we remember;
what do we forget?
What must we remember?
What can we not afford to forget?
Where is the blessing; where is the hope?
Where is the new music?

Leaders, dare to let go! Dare to lead your communities in shaping and singing the new music!
Dare to live the Emmaus story in this, your new time!