

4/23/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl on this chilly spring morning, whether you are here with us in person or watching on Zoom.

May you be blessed this morning with encouragement and the light of Christ.

Easter was a couple of weeks ago, but we technically remain in the Easter season until Pentecost.

We'll sing a few more Easter songs and hear the story of Jesus walking unrecognized alongside two disciples on their way to Emmaus.

We begin our time of worship with a favorite Easter hymn, and we will continue with an opportunity for any announcements after that.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: We watch this morning for the light that the darkness has not overcome.

**People: We watch for the fire that was in the beginning
and that burns still in the brilliance of the rising sun.**

Leader: We watch for the glow of life that gleams in the growing earth
and glistens in sea and sky.

**People: We watch for your light, O God, in the eyes of every living creature
and in the ever-living flame of our own souls.**

Leader: If the grace of seeing were ours this day, we would glimpse You in all that lives.

**All: *Grant us the grace of seeing this day.
Grant us the grace of seeing.***

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Loving God, Help us to see your light today. Grant us the grace of seeing, so that we might recognize you on the road with us. Inspire us toward hospitality.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

(Carol Penner, www.leadinginworship.com)

Like the disciples at Emmaus, we offer what we have.
They offered their company, their table, their bread.

We invite you to be with us, Jesus, as we offer you our love, our devotion, these gifts.
May our eyes be opened to your holy presence among us, now and always. Amen.

“HOSTING JESUS” – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 24:13-35

This story of Jesus walking with the two disciples to Emmaus is one of the most beautiful and intriguing accounts from the Bible. There are many angles from which we could explore it, and this morning our focus will be hospitality.

Bring to mind for a minute if you can, one of the memories you have of being on the receiving end of the most gracious hospitality. What was it like? How did you feel?

I can remember a number of delicious meals I’ve had in my life. Some of the most striking examples of hospitality I’ve experienced were in Latin America. The hosts not only cooked delicious food, but they were quick to offer what they had and open up their lives to a foreigner.

You might think as well of your most meaningful experience hosting? Who did you host? What happened that made this experience memorable? Ultimately good hospitality hinges not on the quality of food or accommodations, but on the kind of relational connection established.

In Luke’s account, this story of the disciples walking with Jesus to Emmaus took place on Easter Sunday, the same day that the women saw the empty tomb. Two disciples – one of them named Cleopas, and the other perhaps his wife or a companion – are leaving Jerusalem for the village of Emmaus. These two are obviously not part of the inner circle of 11 apostles, but part of the extended group of disciples.

We don’t know exactly where Emmaus is, but probable locations would be northwest of Jerusalem, about 7½ miles away according to Luke’s account.

The more relevant question is why are these disciples going from Jerusalem to this village? Are they from there? Was this where they have lodging? Are they eager to escape Jerusalem after all the tragedy of the previous week? Or maybe they are simply ready to go on with life. What more is there to do? The Messiah was killed, so they’ll go back to their daily life.

SUMMARIZING THE STORY

At any rate, as the scene opens, the two disciples are in a vigorous discussion about everything that has happened during what we now call Holy Week.

From nowhere, Jesus shows up and starts walking with them. His question: “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” could be translated, “What are these words that you are volleying back and forth to each other as you walk?”

That’s a vivid word picture of a vigorous discussion. Maybe they are tossing ideas back and forth. Clearly the subject matter is important to them. And emotional too – they look at Jesus with very sad, downcast expressions on their faces.

Cleopas asked, “are you the only person sojourning in Jerusalem that hasn’t heard about all this?”

Passover is a unique week, because Jerusalem swells in size every year with guests during this high festival of the year. Over the past week, the mysterious traveler as well as these two disciples have presumably been guests in the city.

There's a major irony, because the discussion is precisely around Jesus, and yet they do not recognize Jesus when he is in front of them. In the Bible as well as other ancient traditions, there are stories of heroes hosting angels that appeared incognito. For example, three angels stayed with Abram and Sarai at the Oaks of Mamre, but appeared to be human travelers.

So the Cleopas and his companion explain to their unknown fellow traveler what they are discussing. They had their hopes up that this Jesus could be the Messiah, the chosen one of God who the scriptures promised would redeem Israel.

But tragically, he was arrested and executed, dashing their hopes. They are left to let go of those hopes and return to daily life, except that they have heard the report of the women discovering the empty tomb and seeing angels. Their discussion apparently became a little passionate as they tried to figure out what happened to the body and what this could all mean.

So they bring the mysterious traveler up to speed on all they have been discussing. Jesus, who had previously appeared totally ignorant, now challenges them:

"How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"

Jesus says that this tragic death fulfilled the scriptures. He explains the scriptures to the disciples. They will later remember that their hearts were burning as Jesus spoke.

We would all love to know what passages exactly Jesus referred to. I suspect that the crux of the issue is seeing how a death, how weakness, and a refusal to use violence, all was part of the pattern of God's redemption – the pattern of resurrection.

HOSPITALITY

As the disciples reach Emmaus, they invite Jesus to stay with them. They extend hospitality to the mysterious fellow traveler. Hospitality comes from the Latin word *hosped*, which is also the source of the word *host*.

Hosped means either "host" or "guest" or "stranger." It seems like it would be a little confusing for all of those meanings to be covered by one word, but maybe that shows the reciprocal relationship.

By hospitality, I mean more than simply offering a person a place to stay. I refer to a relationship in which one party opens up their home or their lives, in order to allow the other party rest or refreshment, or meet the other party's needs.

For both parties, the exchange of hospitality involves vulnerability and risk. The host becomes vulnerable in opening up their home or space to the guest. Often, we feel that vulnerability in the form of a compulsion to clean before the guests arrive, because we don't want the guests to see the clutter we might normally live with.

Or the host might fret about what food to prepare, and if the food will be adequate. The host opens up their private space to the guest. The guest can learn all manner of things about the life of the host while staying. If the guest is a complete stranger, there is another form of vulnerability. The host could be meeting the desperate need of the stranger or opening themselves up to be robbed or harmed.

For the guest, too, receiving hospitality is a vulnerable place. To be in the position of guest is to be vulnerable on one level, because you obviously don't have your own house and your own food. You must rely on the provisions of another.

You might risk misunderstanding. You might accidentally offend the sensibilities of the host, especially if you are an outsider and don't know the local culture. Or if you are in the position of being a stranger in need, you risk rejection.

HITCHHIKING

My dad tells a story from the days when he used to hitchhike. Hitchhiking is another form of hospitality. The driver is the host, and the rider is the guest. This was probably in the 70s when hitchhiking was fairly common. Dad once hitchhiked as far as Virginia from Iowa.

But on this occasion, however, Dad was the one driving and picking up a hitchhiker. The young man sat in the back seat. It was after dark. Dad could see him through the rear-view mirror, but his bag was in the shadows.

Some minutes into the ride, Dad saw through the mirror that the guy took something out of his bag: a long, thin object that appeared to be a knife. He rested it on his thigh. My dad started sweating, and regretting his choice to pick up a hitchhiker. He continued to drive, not sure what to do.

After a while, the man lifted up the object and started combing his hair with it – because, it was in fact, just a comb. Any time we show hospitality, we take a risk. That is what it means to be vulnerable – being in the position of being wounded.

RECIPROCITY IN EMMAUS STORY

In the Emmaus story, there is also a relationship of hospitality. Jesus was the stranger who came alongside the two disciples. The disciples allowed Jesus to walk with them and enter their conversation. They were hosts on one level, but also had the opportunity to listen to the stranger's insight as he opened up the scriptures for them.

When they reached Emmaus, they invited the stranger to stay with them. Luke doesn't make clear whether this house belongs to either Cleopas or his companion, or if this was a place of temporary lodging that they had arranged. Perhaps the two disciples were also guests in that space.

Jesus acted like he was going further. Of course, we know the risen Jesus didn't have any particular place to be. In Middle Eastern culture, when someone makes an offer of hospitality, it is polite for the other person to kindly refuse, until the host insists.

The disciples urged Jesus strongly. *It's nightfall! You can't go further anyway. You really need to spend the night here.*

It wasn't like our culture, where we might say, "hey, if you need a place to stay the night, the couch is yours, but do what you want." This is much more assertive and forceful than that. The same word translated "urged strongly" is used elsewhere in the Bible for hosts urging guests to accept an offer or a present. In the book of Jonah, this word describes the sailors having to "row strongly" to keep their ship from capsizing in the storm.

While Jesus mostly plays the role of the guest, the relationship has been reciprocal. The hospitality is exchanged in two directions. Jesus opened up the scriptures for the two travelers, helping them see how the tragic death of Jesus was actually in fulfillment with the scriptures rather than the ultimate disappointment.

But once in Emmaus, Jesus explicitly became the host, as he blessed their meal and broke bread. It is in the moment when Jesus hosted the disciples that their eyes were opened and they finally recognized him.

DESIRE TO BE WELCOMING

In our visioning process at Alexanderwohl, as we've asked the question, "What do you want Alexanderwohl to be known for?" we've heard many of you express a desire to be a welcoming congregation.

A congregation where we are friendly and inviting, where we accept people without judgment, and where we listen to one another's story. The welcome applies most especially to those that visit or more recently enter the life of the congregation, but it also applies to our longstanding relationships.

We realize that we cannot sustain energy and life in this congregation simply on the assumption that we exist for those who were born here, or that we will always maintain the exact same worship, traditions, and activities that have been meaningful in the past.

What if our call is to focus on hospitality in order to live into our vision of who we want to be? This hospitality would apply to both existing relationships as well as new relationships. It doesn't necessarily mean inviting folks into our homes, and serving meals. Hospitality can be a metaphor for our way of relating to one another.

It means showing curiosity. Not assuming we know the other person and can categorize them according to where we place them. It means we seek to open our lives to one another with the vulnerability that entails on both sides.

This vulnerability will happen more naturally in smaller-group settings. We have a variety of small-group settings – Sunday school, committees, activities like choir, or friend-circles. We need to think about how to make these small group settings more permeable.

I'd like to make two points about hospitality we usually don't think about. One is that we need to know ourselves in order to extend hospitality. We need to be able to articulate who we are, share our story, communicate what we value. Doing that can feel risky.

The second is that we need to not assume we truly know the other person, even if we've known them in some way for years. That looks like showing curiosity toward the other person's story, while withholding judgment. Allowing the other space to be themselves.

I invite you to reflect on how hospitality applies to our own congregational life during the next week. Next week, we'll continue more in depth with the themes of hospitality and vulnerability, looking at another passage through that lens.

Jesus was known in the breaking of the bread. In the exchange of authentic hospitality, we experience the presence of Jesus who is risen with us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why do you think the two disciples didn't recognize Jesus?
2. What does this story, with the exchange of hospitality between the two travelers and Jesus, teach us about hospitality?
3. (Share joys or concerns in your own life)

BENEDICTION

(based on words in *The Soil and the Seed Project*, vol. 6, week 9)

Jesus meets us on the road
when we are disoriented and disappointed.

Jesus listens to our sorrows.

Jesus becomes the host at our table,
and in the breaking of the bread,
makes himself known.

May we recognize Christ, our risen Lord,
on the road with us.