

Do We Recognize Christ?

Luke 24:13-35

April 6, 2008

There's a maple tree in Milford, Connecticut that's been pretty much the same down through the years. New leaves come out every spring and the leaves fall off in the autumn. Hurricane Gloria blew a limb off in 1985 and that's when it started.

One of the residents of Hawley Avenue, the street in Milford where the tree stands, (one of the residents, Claudia) thought she saw Jesus' face in the spot where the limb was blown off. "It took my breath away," she recalls. "I told my friend to come and pretty soon we had the entire neighborhood here looking."

Now Claudia told the reporter who came to cover the story that she wasn't particularly "overly religious." She offered to the reporter this explanation: "I am not reading the Bible all the time." But, she did say that she hoped people would be able to take some hope from it.

Word spread and the maple tree became a sort of popular attraction with car after car driving by to see the face of Christ on the tree. Another Hawley Avenue neighbor, Eve Mizera, brought her 17-year-old son over to touch the tree in the hope it would cure him of the seizures that he suffers.

Another resident of Milford, Cathy Cornwall, brought her children hoping that it would help them manage the tough decisions they had to make as teenagers.¹

Where do we look for Jesus in our world? Where do we look for him when we're hurting? Where when our hearts ache? Where when tragedy or disappointment comes our way?

Over the years some have thought they've seen the face of Jesus on the side of a house, on the side of a barn, on a town's water tower. I don't put a lot of stock in such things, but ... I guess it's not enough for me to see Jesus' face on something or in the clouds or ... As I reread the Gospel text for today, I guess the question that came to me was "do we recognize Jesus – the resurrected Jesus?"

Those two followers didn't recognize him when he walked with them along that dusty road between Jerusalem and Emmaus. They'd gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and to see Jesus hoping that he would lead the revolution they believed was to happen. On their return trip they were recounting the things they'd learned from him – the things they'd observed in Jerusalem – how they'd felt – how they now felt: depressed, dejected, defeated.

Jesus seemingly just moseyed up to them along the way and started to walk with them. Still they didn't recognize him. He made a fairly critical comment about their lack of understanding – he spoke – still they did not recognize him.

When they arrived at their home in Emmaus, Jesus acted as if he was going to continue on his way. They were too hospitable to let that happen. They invited him in for some bread and wine. He stayed and when he took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them they recognized him. And then he was gone.

The bible scholars tell us that despite the similarities between that Emmaus' scene and the last supper scene in the upper room, they don't believe the intention was to remind those present of the upper room meal. They

believe the intention was to provide an example of how the risen Lord will be noticed or encountered for the rest of time. That is, in the common everyday experiences of life, like when a meal is shared.

Dr. Tom Troeger recalls having to be away from his fiancé for over a month when he had to take his comprehensives during his senior year in college. He wrote how the two of them were madly in love and how sad and depressed he was. He traveled on a bus from Ithaca, New York to New Haven, Connecticut and the bus stopped at the Binghamton Greyhound station for lunch. He noted that it wasn't the best atmosphere to have to dine in.

He recalls that he sat down on one of those spinning stools at the U-shaped counter and found himself sitting directly across from an old woman. When she noticed him, she said, "Boy, honey, you sure look depressed."

He replied, "I am depressed," and started to cry.

The woman reached across to pat his cheek but he pulled away because there was dirt under her fingernails. She asked, "What's wrong, honey?"

He told her about his fiancé and how much he was missing her. He even showed the woman a picture of her. The woman commented, "O, I never saw such a beautiful woman."

Then she told him of having been married to a traveling salesman until his death. She told how they used to cry together whenever he had to go away. She told how happy they were though when he returned. "Marriage was wonderful," she offered. "You're going to have a wonderful marriage. Everything will be just fine."

She suggested that perhaps he would feel better if he ate something. She ordered the last donut underneath the scratchy plastic cover. She broke the donut and said, "Here, eat this."

Just then an announcement came over the speakers in the diner announcing a departing bus. And she said, "That's my bus. I've got to go." And she left.

And Troeger said, "Just then my eyes were opened and I recognized that Christ was there in that bus station."²

A few years ago a group of salesmen attended a regional sales meeting in the Chicago area. They had assured their wives that they would be home in time for supper on Friday night.

The meeting ended up running late and the salesmen practically raced through the airport trying to reach their plane in time. As they did so, one of the men accidentally knocked over a table supporting a basket of apples. They all did their best to miss the mess but arrived at the plane in time to board it.

All but one. He paused because he noticed that beside the stand was a little girl. He stopped and then noticed that she was blind and about ten-years-old. While he helped her gather up the apples, he noticed that several were bruised and knew they would be hard to sell. So, trying to make things right, he gave her \$10 and said, "Here, this ten dollars is for the damage we did and I hope it didn't spoil your day."

He started to walk away to call his wife and to make new flight arrangements. As he did though the little girl called out to him, "Are you Jesus?"

“Are you Jesus?”

He said that it brought him up short and he wondered if it was his simple act of kindness that reminded her of the stories she had heard about Jesus. Was it possible that even though she was blind she recognized the kindness, the act of service, as a Jesus’ move?³

A Civil War chaplain was visiting a wounded soldier on the battlefield. He asked the wounded man if he’d like to hear a few verses from the Bible. The young soldier said, “No, I’m thirsty and would really like some water.”

So the chaplain gave the soldier a drink from his canteen. Then he asked the young man again if he’d like to hear some scripture. Again the soldier responded with, “No sir, not now – but could you put something under my head?”

The chaplain again did as the soldier requested and then asked a third time if the man wanted to hear some scriptures. This time the soldier said, “No, I’m cold. Could you cover me up?”

The chaplain took off his inside coat and wrapped it around the soldier. Deciding not to ask again, the chaplain began to leave. The soldier called to him and said, “Look, chaplain, if there’s anything in that book of yours that makes a person do for another what you’ve done for me, then I want to hear it.”⁴ “If what you’ve done for me looks like what Jesus would do, I want to hear some more.”

God often comes to us in the simplest ways – when a piece of bread is shared – when a smile is offered – when a moment is shared – while on a walk with a friend – when a kind comment is made by a grocery store clerk.

Christ is with us in the stranger who slows to walk down the street with us – in the friend who just happens to call us on the phone – in the child who smiles at us from another table in a fast food restaurant because she knows we’ve seen her impish spirit while her parents have been too busy talking to one another to notice – in the transient who stops us on the street and asks for some money for a cup of coffee – in the breaking of crackers to put in our soup when suddenly we are reminded that it was because of his being broken that we have new life.

The followers became aware that the one who walked with them on the dusty road that day was Jesus when he simply broke bread with them. The one who did something as spectacular as triumphing over death was revealed – became known – experienced in something as common as a simple snack. Let us open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, and our minds so that we might recognize that Christ is with us every moment of every day.

Where can we see Jesus? Perhaps on a tree where a branch has broken off, but much more so in the Bible – much more so in the hymns that we sing – much more so in the teachings we have heard – much more so in the Lord’s Supper – much more so in the breaking of bread and drinking from the cup – much more so in the simple things in life.

1. “Face of Jesus seen in a maple tree.” *The Morning Call*. Allentown, PA, July 25, 1992, p. B-25.
2. Dr. Thomas H. Troeger, Seasons of Worship. February, 1990, Cokesbury Seminars.
3. Brennan Manning, “Are You Jesus?” The Pastor’s Story File, March, 1994, p. 1.

4. Carlos Wilton, via PresbyNet, "Sermonship, 04/17/1994," # 5, 4/12/94.