

## Faith: A Community Endeavor, Part 1

Luke 24:13-35  
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Not long ago my sister held “grammy camp” at my house for my 2yr old niece and her 4 year old brother. As I walked into the kitchen in the midst of saying something to her, my nephew who was standing next to her turned to me and said with great seriousness “just a minute—I’m talking. Wait until I’m finished and then it will be your turn.” Obviously his parents were instilling an important lesson and it was working—at least to his advantage in this case!” It’s a lesson we probably all learned early in life either at school or at home. Do not interrupt others when they are speaking—especially parents and teachers.

Interrupting unnecessarily is a bad habit we often take on even before we are aware of it. One of the basic rules of successful communication is effective listening—but all too often we fail. Gary Chapman who wrote Five Love Languages noted the recent research indicates that the average individual listens for only 17 seconds before interrupting and interjecting his own ideas.

Effective listening is more than avoiding interrupting, it is being content to listen to the entire thought of someone and formulating a response. Interruptions are not limited to discourse. We experience interruptions in our lives hundreds of times a day—some are quite jarring—others we barely notice. Phone calls, emails, texts, unplanned encounters, unexpected calamities. Whatever the source, interruptions are part of our daily living. As C.S. Lewis said...“the truth is, of course, that what one regards as interruptions are precisely one’s life”

Now our story today begins with an interruption. According to Luke, 2 travelers are on their way to Emmaus—about 7 miles down the road from Jerusalem. Luke doesn’t tell us why—maybe they wanted to get

away from all that has happened in Jerusalem in the past few days. Maybe they left in fear, or despair or maybe they left because Jesus' death was a real game changer—leaving them without hope. As they are walking on the road, a stranger comes along side and interrupts their conversation. “What are you talking about? Where have you been, they respond. How could you possibly not have heard about all about all the things that happened these past few days?” Incredulous! So they humor the man and begin to describe the events even though they could not understand it all. Surprisingly the stranger began to explain it all to them beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, and all that was said in the scriptures.

The hour was late and as they reached their destination—they invited the stranger in to share a meal and stay with them. It was in this hospitable act of sharing a meal that it all came together—they were in the presence of the risen Jesus! They run!! They run with hearts pounding, with more energy than they had ever known, I suspect, every step of that 7 or so miles back to Jerusalem to share the good news.

What just happened here? Perhaps this is interruption of more significance that we originally thought. I know we celebrate the formation of the church on Pentecost, but Luke's story opens us to the possibility that the church was born right there in the middle of Jesus breaking the bread and sharing it with these two men. Their eyes were opened with his presence at the table. They were transformed. Their hearts were on fire—and they could do nothing less than share the good news. Isn't that church? In the breaking of the bread, in the sharing of the meal in the presence of the risen Lord, we are transformed...empowered to share the good news with others with our words and actions.

This was the making and gathering of the faithful community. The story moves from isolation to community. Two isolated, desperate, fearful men transformed by Christ in their midst, running to share the good news with others—creating community.

Luke drives home his theme. In community, experiences are understood based on reflection on the Scriptures and the inspiration of the Spirit of the risen Christ. The breaking of bread is a rich symbol of the community's life together in Christ, life in Christ defines the mission of the church—the gathered community. We in the reformed tradition understand the importance of the gathered community. We understand “it takes a village” for us to traverse this amazing, challenging, confusing, rewarding, painful and often unknown journey we call faith. In baptism—parents promise to raise their children in the faith and in and apart of the church. The gathered community in turn promises to embrace and support the children through nurture, guidance, prayer and instruction. It doesn't stop there.

Truth be told, we are all continually developing in our faith. As we move into adulthood the faith we had as a child is tested by all the interruptions that occur in life—from those we celebrate to those that devastate us. We need the family of faith. All too often in this culture of “doing our own thing” and being self-sufficient, we are lulled into the belief that we can do the “faith-thing” by ourselves. If we have questions or doubts or struggles—well, we say, we can work through those on our own. To the contrary—Luke's story tells us that faith is a community endeavor—always has been—always will be. In the many gospel stories of their encounters with the risen Jesus—what is the first thing the disciples do—they run back to the gathered community to tell the others. The early Christians gathered together to share their grief, their confusion. The community of believers continued to gather—

sharing, supporting, encouraging, strengthening each other's faith. That is how we flourish in faith—"together"

I do not condemn; rather, I truly grieve for those who purport themselves to be "spiritual but not religious" and therefore have no need of the church. I grieve for those who identify as "nones" who have no experience of church. I grieve for those who have no space in their lives for engaging in the gathered community. We need the connectedness that is unique to the church—the connectedness that reminds us we are the children of God whose grace and love bring real meaning and purpose to our lives.

Over the years, I've subjected you to many stories from the United Presbyterian Church of Hoxie, the faith community in which I was raised. Likewise you have shared some of yours. Sometime of church camps, mission efforts, Sunday School classes or teacher anecdotes, a special worship or gathering, or a time of celebration. These stories are part of our faith stories that make the risen Christ real. It is in the gathered community we are reminded of our identity in Christ and we receive strength and encouragement to live into that identity. Within this fellowship we first experience what it means to love as Christ loves. It is a place of grace where mistakes aren't rubbed in but rubbed out because in fellowship mercy wins over justice. (Rick Warren)

As I have said before—being a Christian is not an individual sport. Faith does not flourish when we try to be spiritual "lone rangers". It is God's plan for us to be in community—he created Adam AND Eve—it is not good to be alone. He called not just Moses but the whole people of Israel to be his people He sent Jonah to Nineveh not to turn just one person back to God but the whole of the community. Think about it—Did Jesus travel alone? He was always with a group. That is a message of the cross—solidifying our communal relationship with God and one

another. Faith flourishes in community. We need each other. We need community N.T. Wright wrote—“If God is our father, the church is our mother—these words are those of Swiss Reformer John Calvin—thus, it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be newborn baby all by yourself.”

Faith is not easy and it lives and grows best in a community. It does take a village to each of us on this journey of faith. When interruptions come barreling into our lives, it is in community we can best interpret and respond, be sustained and grow in faith. Sometimes it takes the community to help us hold on to the faith we have in God to bring peace, mercy, love in the midst of heartbreak, suffering, desolation, or the hypocrisy of the world we experience every day. It is in the community of faith that we are assured that even when we feel hopeless the Risen Lord walks with us and by his power we are able to say no to every hopeless, negative, destruction thought. Together we can grasp his hand more tightly as we take our next steps. Henri Nouwen says in *Finding My Way Home* –Christian community is the place where we keep the flame of hope alive among us...That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in each other.” It is in community our faith takes shape, is nurtured, it is lived out, is celebrated, and where we are empowered. It is in community that we are reminded that God loves and accepts us even as we are.

To God be the Glory for all that God has done, is doing, and will continue to do in the gathered community of faith! Amen!