THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Talking to Strangers* Luke 24:13-35

Over the years, my friend Cynthia Stateman and I have exchanged all sorts of stories. We, along with Pastor Phyllis Meighen were roommates at seminary. Cynthia has many more stories to tell than I do, and all are wonderful and I would like to tell you one. One of my favorites, which is about her mother.

After she retired, Mrs. Stateman decided she would learn to speak Spanish. So, she enrolled in a class and bought the study book. After a few classes, she decided she needed more practice with real people. Since she was living in Southern California, she figured this would not be a problem as there were many Spanish-speaking people all around her.

Over the next few weeks, Delores Stateman started taking bus trips all over town, indeed, all over Orange County. Her habit was to find a bus stop where there were Spanish-speaking people, and she would wait along with them, striking-up conversations with strangers as they waited together. When the bus came, she would often board the bus with them to continue their conversation.

One day Cynthia got a call. It was her mother who informed her that she needed to come and get her…in Tijuana, Mexico.

It seems Mrs. Stateman had been at a bus stop when the immigration authorities, aided by the police, were making sweeps for illegal aliens. They were doing pretty much what Mrs. Stateman did. They would go to predominantly Spanish speaking neighborhoods—to the bus stops—and they would order the Spanish speakers on to a bus that would drive them to Tijuana.

That day, they had stopped at the same bus stop as Mrs. Stateman. However, they did not ask Mrs. Stateman to get on the bus…which caused her to object.

“Why are you doing this to them and not to me?” she had demanded. And she noted that none of them had been asked for identification.

The policeman looked at the small African American woman and said, “We only want the illegals, lady.”

“Well, how do you know that I am not illegal? Did you ask me for my identification? Did you ask any of us for our identification?” she said.

She had experienced a particular kind of hospitality among the people at that, and other, bus stops, and she was not going to forget that. She started speaking Spanish to the police, and in fact, from that time on, she refused to show them her identification, and she refused to speak English.

The police gave up and ushered her onto the bus. Sometimes, talking to strangers will have surprising outcomes.

The story of the walk to Emmaus, which we heard earlier, dramatically, is a story about talking to strangers, and it is found only in the gospel of Luke. The timing of the story is the same day as the resurrection. Two people—Cleopas and his unnamed companion—have left Jerusalem after the disaster of Good Friday and the confusion of Easter morning’s empty tomb. As they walk along, they continue to talk about everything that has happened.

Suddenly, there is another traveler on the road. It is Jesus, but they do not recognize him. They do not know quite what to believe about Jesus, but it is clear that they do not expect him to be on the road to Emmaus with them. So, for them, Jesus is a stranger.

So, Jesus falls into step with them and, as he has come in in the middle of their conversation, he asks what they are talking about.

They are shocked. Immediately, Cleopas replies: *“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"* [v. 18] And they fill him in on some of the details. They tell him about Jesus, his crucifixion, the empty tomb and the angels, and how they had *“hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”*[v. 21]

Their disappointment is obvious and real. They tell him it is now *“the third day since these things took place.”* [v. 21]

Rather than express sympathy, our translation—the NRSV—says that Jesus tells them they are *"slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!"*

I have always found that a bit difficult to understand. A clearer translation from the Common English Version puts it this way:

*25Then Jesus asked the two disciples, “Why can't you understand? How can you be so slow to believe all that the prophets said? 26Didn’t you know that the Messiah would have to suffer before he was given his glory?” 27Jesus then explained everything written about himself in the Scriptures, beginning with the Law of Moses and the Books of the Prophets.*

To the disciples’ credit, they continued to listen, but somehow, they still did not recognize Jesus. Most of us wonder how that could have been so. Surely they would have known him by sight. If not sight, surely they would have known his voice. They must have heard him preach…but no. For some reason, they cannot see him for who he is…not yet.

They finally recognize him when he sits at a table with them, when he blesses and breaks the bread that they may be fed. The recognize him as the one who has fed them before—fed their hearts and spirits with a new understanding of the nearness, the loving closeness of God.

They know him when they see the embodied message of his teaching and his ministry in the breaking of the bread—that which was whole is now broken for them, for their benefit, for their nourishment, for their life and well-being.

That which was whole—a loaf—must be broken in order to feed—ourselves, and others. There is no way around that. A life—Jesus’ life—had to be fully opened to them so that they, and we, are able to come close to him. It was Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection that decisively proclaimed God’s compassion and love for humankind. He came to them as a stranger but becomes our channel of God’s peace and love, God’s *shalom.*

Indeed, one of the parts of this story that many in the ancient world would have responded to is that Jesus is initially referred to (by Cleopas) as “a stranger.” Jesus is initially depicted as a stranger, giving the disciples in this story the challenge of showing hospitality.

Fortunately, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus rise to this challenge. As they come near the village that is their destination, Jesus walks ahead as if he is going on. But the disciples urge him strongly, saying, *“Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.”* [v. 29] So Jesus goes in to stay with them, and he becomes not a stranger but their guest. They welcome and include him in their lives and invite him to stay with them.

This is what we should be looking for in this story and in every story about Jesus—the way in which he draws close to people to show them how well he knows who they are and what they need; the way in which he is interested in seeing the deepest need we have and honoring that need with his presence and his love.

So, it is telling that they did not recognize him at first. They were too concerned with their own sense of loss. As a stranger, it is telling that he became the one who helped them understand what had happened and what it meant.

It is telling that, as a stranger, he gave them a broader understanding of Jesus’ story by putting it into the context of the whole of *their* story—the whole of the Bible story.

In essence, and in fact, Jesus showed them how his and their lives were connected. Indeed, he showed them how his and their lives and the lives of their ancestors were all connected through the ages, and especially through God’s continued desire to bless humankind; God’s continued desire to bring us into lives of freedom and peace by covering us with compassion and grace.

In talking to this stranger, Cleopas and his friend have come to understand how we are bound together through God—through God’s compassion, faithfulness, and desire for human thriving.

Many centuries later, someone else would say the same thing. Sixty years ago, in his letter from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King expressed the notion that: *“In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men* [and women] *are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”*

Just 60 years ago, Martin Luther King and most of the African American people in this country, were strangers. Strangers in their own country to the extent that their lives—their thriving and even their existence—was not well known to other citizens in this country.

Most minorities were in the same predicament. We came from different cultures. Our eyes are differently shaped. Our skin color is different from the majority. In a sense, we, too, have been difficult to recognize. It has taken time and courage, and continues to be, our mission to become more than strangers.

The Risen Christ did this by drawing close to Cleopas and his friend. He was a stranger to them, but he was also an interested stranger. He was interested in them and what they were saying. He was also interested in how their story was connected to the on-going story of God—to his story.

There is an inherent difficulty to talking to strangers. It takes a certain amount of time and courage to be the stranger who draws close to listen to others. It takes courage to be the stranger who also shares of ones self with others.

We could, like Delores Stateman, end up in Tijuana.

We could, like Martin Luther King, end up in the Birmingham Jail…or more.

However, we do this—we talk to strangers, and we listen to strangers so that we might learn something new about ourselves…and others of God’s beloved people.

Pope Francis has stirred up the Roman Catholic Church since his, gaining particular attention for working to make the church “the home of all.” In an interview, he talked about proclamation and Christian hospitality. “Proclamation ... focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things,” he said. “This is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus.”

It is good the pope mentioned Emmaus, because this is where Jesus came to his disciples as a stranger, as a guest and as a host. Emmaus is where we learn how to welcome one another around a table, and then go out into the world with a proclamation. Emmaus is where we come together and strengthen our bonds with Jesus and with each other.

When we practice Christian hospitality, when we allow ourselves to talk to strangers—to people whose language, culture, or life stories are different than ours. When we do this, we become part of a mighty spiritual movement—one that can overcome divisions even in a terribly polarized world.

Our good news is that we know how to make a start in all of this. It all begins when Jesus breaks the bread, our eyes are opened and we recognize him. My prayer for us is that we will never be afraid to talk to a stranger—or to listen to one. My prayer is that our eyes will be opened too. Not only once but many times in our lifetime, and that we will recognize Christ every time we do. Let this be so. Amen.