

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/30/2014, The Third Sunday of Easter
Luke 24:13-35
Love thee more dearly

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this morning's sermon, I call it "Love Thee More Dearly." That's because Godspell had it right in that catchy tune:

Day by day
Day by day
Oh Dear Lord
Three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day¹

Our opening text for this morning speaks of a burning heart. Reflecting back on the day just passed, the two disciples recall how moved they were by the presence and the teaching of our resurrected Jesus:

³²They said to each other, "Did not our hearts *burn within us* while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?"

My! What an afternoon that must have been! — to have walked along for seven miles with Jesus and to have listened to him as he taught them sacred matters concerning himself from the scriptures. I would have been glad to be there, like a school child, quiet as a mouse trailing along behind them and listening in. I bet their hearts did indeed burn within them.

The goal of my sermon is that we should be more like them: that we will try this coming year to have even more earnest and warm hearts toward our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The notion of a warm heart is a Methodist notion, but one to which we Lutherans made a proud contribution. I am referring to what is called John Wesley's "Aldersgate Experience." In Wesley's journal for May 24, 1738, we read this testimony:

¹ The song is available in lots of places. For example,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtR7xrgZ_Fk

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading *Luther's* preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart *strangely warmed*. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.²

Ever since, the Wesleyan tradition has valued fervor in the faith and zeal for God.

But Martin Luther certainly knew such fervor and I suspect that many Lutherans have likewise felt their heart strangely warmed by the story of Jesus and his love for us, including his death and resurrection for us.

It all goes back to these two Easter disciples in their walk to the village of Emmaus with our resurrected Jesus. They were among the first Christians to have their hearts burning within them because of Jesus.

This sermon, then, will be structured around two questions concerning the heart: (1) What kind of a heart does our resurrected Lord have toward us? And (2) What kind of a heart ought we to have toward him?³

THE HEART OF JESUS US-WARD

First, what kind of a heart did Jesus bring with him out of the grave? He had been through a lot, including the sorrow of betrayal, denial, and abandonment, the mocking of interrogation, the injustice of condemnation, and the agony of crucifixion. Now, on this first day of his resurrection, what kind of a heart does Jesus bring with him?

I think that the first thing we can say, judging by today's Gospel story, is that Jesus has a kind heart toward his disciples. These two disciples, for example, are not the foremost of his disciples. They were not part of the great Twelve, this is the first time we even here the name Cleopas, and the other fellow remains nameless. So they were rather minor characters in the story. Still, humble people or not, they were sad about what had happened to Jesus. That is pretty clear about them. When Jesus approaches them and asks them what they are talking about, they simply stand still, looking sad:

² <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xvi.html>

³ I believe I have benefited from Johann Gerhard's reflections on today's Gospel story, Luke 24:13-35, in Johann Gerhard, *Postilla*, Volume 1 (The Center for the Study of Lutheran Orthodoxy: Malone, Texas, 2003)

¹⁷And he said to them, “What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. (Luke 24:17, RSV)

Long ago, Jesus had instructed his servant Isaiah to comfort his people:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. (Isaiah 40:1, NRSV)

Now, our Lord Jesus himself takes the place of Isaiah and reveals the sympathetic nature of his heart by comforting these two sad disciples. It is not long before he turns their sadness into happy and burning hearts.

By right, heaven is the home of our resurrected Jesus. He has every right to ascend to heaven, to be seated at the right hand of the Father, and to hear the eternal and angelic Sanctus sung to him. And Jesus has indeed ascended to the right hand of the Father to make continual intercession for our poor old earth. But in this story, we see that he also rushes back to earth to be with his people, to comfort them, to stir up their hearts, to indeed dwell with his people in day by day.

And this is in full accord with what he had promised. For example, in Matthew 18, we read about “two or three” gathered together in his name:

²⁰For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20, KJV)

In today’s story, we see a lovely picture of this: three fellows walking along the road to Emmaus, one of them being our Lord Jesus right there in the midst of them.

And for how long a stretch of time had Jesus promised to go with his disciples? Why, till the end of time:

¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am *with you always*, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20, RSV)

And is not the name of our dear church the true and fitting name of Jesus as he walks the road to Emmaus. He is “Immanuel,” which means, God with us:

²³“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:23, RSV)

So, that is the first thing I note about the heart Jesus brought up with him from the grave: It was a kind and sympathetic heart.

EAGER TO TEACH

The other main thing we can see about the heart of Jesus is that it is a heart eager to teach. Jesus would not leave us uninstructed, as if it is enough to let us grow up by happenstance, with a wish and a prayer for good luck. No, Jesus not only comforts these two disciples, but he comforts them by teaching them the most important lessons in life. In this case, he teaches them about himself. He could have risen from the grave, gone on to heaven, and left the human race ignorant of his meaning for life. But that is not the way of Jesus. Instead, he teaches those disciples along the road to Emmaus until their very hearts burn within them. He opens their eyes to the scriptures they have long cherished, but had not fully understood. He opens their eyes to see that the holy scriptures of Israel must never be abandoned, but rather cherished for their instruction about *him* — about our Lord Jesus. Christians do not grow up as mushrooms indifferent to the light. No, Christians need the light. They need the Word of God in order to flourish.

So, Jesus taught those two until their hearts burned within them. Jesus must have been a born teacher.

OUR HEARTS

Now, let's shift the focus from the heart of the risen Jesus to the heart of his disciples. Here the chief thing I want to lift up about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is that they were willing learners. They were already preoccupied with Jesus even before Jesus joined them in their walk. And when he arrived, they listened to him, though they thought him a stranger. They did not close their minds to him, they did not close their hearts to him. They did not dismiss him as a stranger, saying to him, "We are weary of talking about Jesus. And in any case, we want to be alone." They were not rude and send him away. Rather, they walked with this stranger and listened to him as he talked of their dearest subject matter: Jesus of Nazareth. Why, they were like *you dear folks*: they made themselves available to hear the old, old story of Jesus and of his love.

They were earnest, I say, about Jesus. For them, talk about Jesus was not idle chatter. Their eyes did not glaze over and their ears did not become dim at the divine instruction. They listened to the words about Jesus until their very hearts burned within them.

In this, they were like Martin Luther of old. There is a wonderful passage in Luther's treatise on prayer in which he talks about being swept up almost into heaven as he meditates on the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer. I can seldom pray the Our Father with such intensity. In fact, many a time I simply fall asleep at night as I start off saying the prayer. I go through a few petitions, and alas, I fall asleep. But listen to Luther as he describes his manner of prayer:

It may happen occasionally that I may get lost among so many ideas in one petition that I forego the other six. If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation. (Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*)

This treatise on prayer is the famous one addressed to Martin Luther's barber, Peter Beskendorf. Peter had asked Luther how a simple man could pray. Luther answers him by writing a small book for him. And in this book, Luther is very serious about the business of prayer. He does not treat Peter like a child, but expects him to *work* at the business of prayer, which for Luther means that Peter and all Christians must work at the business of immersing ourselves in the Word of God. So, Luther gives this practical advice to his barber, Peter:

So, a good and attentive barber keeps his thoughts, attention, and eyes on the razor and hair and does not forget how far he has gotten with his shaving or cutting. If he wants to engage in too much conversation or let his mind wander or look somewhere else he is likely to cut his customer's mouth, nose, or even his throat. Thus if anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of all one's senses and members, as the proverb says, "*Pluribus intentus, minor est ad singula sensus*"—"He who thinks of many things, thinks of nothing and does nothing right." How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer! (Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*)

Well, Jesus goes on teaching to this very day, including teaching you and me. He uses means of grace to do so: he uses the Bible, the hymns of the church, the conversation during coffee hour, the testimonies and encouragement that brothers and sisters in the Lord can give to one another, maybe he even uses this sermon to speak to you and to speak to me. Our problem is not that we are missing the teaching of the resurrected Jesus. Our problem is that we might have become too casual or complacent about it. If so, we are needlessly depriving ourselves of the comfort and the guidance of the holy Gospel. And don't you think life is already hard enough without making it worse through lukewarm attention to Jesus?

So, let us go back to school. Let us try to read the Bible with more concentration and pray with more earnestness. Indeed, let us "love him more dearly" day by day. Let us think of Jesus with more devotion until our hearts

become strangely warm, perhaps even burning with gratitude to him, for he deserves it, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.