

# The Stranger Walking With Us

0 Comments

*Then they told what had happened on the road,  
and how he had been made known to them  
in the breaking of the bread.*

— Luke 24:35 NRSV

By Rita Willett

Five years ago at a retreat center in North Carolina, I heard the story of the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) as if for the first time. My fellow participants in the School of the Spirit Ministry's two-year program, On Being a Spiritual Nurturer, were gathered with our teachers. In preparation, we had been reading and reflecting on several topics — including liminality, a word that I had never heard before. I learned that liminality is an in-between-place, a threshold, a time-of-not-knowing, a time when faith sustains us. Cleopas and his unnamed companion — I imagine they were husband and wife — were surely in a liminal place as they walked to Emmaus, explaining to a stranger what had happened to the Teacher whom they loved.



I heard the Emmaus story at a time-of-not-knowing for me. Our family was struggling with a teenager's drug and alcohol use. My mother's worsening dementia was a gradual and ongoing loss. I found myself drawn to a deeper relationship with Christ and simultaneously unable to articulate quite who, for me, Christ was. Looking back at my journal, one page stands out — the words "child of God" drawn at the center and chaotic swirls of intersecting lines and colors filling the rest of the space. On the margin, I had written the word "liminality." Like the disciples on the road, it was a time when I was accompanied and yet, could not clearly identify with whom I walked.

Traveling toward Emmaus, Cleopas and his wife accompany one another in their grief and confusion. Christ, the stranger along the road, is welcomed into the conversation — and he listens with compassion to the story that the couple shares.

They in turn become the listeners and he, their Teacher,

warming their hearts as he opened the scriptures with them. With words, Jesus teaches them about the suffering Messiah. With actions — in walking with them, in listening, in offering them words of spiritual nurture — Jesus teaches them how to accompany one another. Borrowing a phrase from theologian Roberto Goizueta, this passage from Luke's gospel teaches us a "theology of accompaniment."

Approaching Emmaus, Cleopas and his wife are reluctant to part with this stranger, inviting him to be their guest. A remarkable mutual hospitality ensues. Christ — the invited guest in the couple's home — blesses, breaks and offers them bread. Only then do they recognize Jesus, the living Christ, as the one making the journey with them.

As a participant in the On Being a Spiritual Nurturer program, I was accompanied by classmates, teachers and a care committee from my monthly meeting. They walked with me, listened to my stories and helped open my heart to the warming presence of Christ. Together, we were learning about being spiritual nurturers. Listening to the story about the walk to

Emmaus, we were taught by the example of Jesus to be present with those who are in liminal places and to practice mutual hospitality. Mike Green, one of the teachers, explained that “the spiritual nurturer must be grounded and rooted in faith, connected to the Divine Presence, while standing in that liminal place – from there, a safe and nurturing space is created in which one can truly listen.”

On Being a Spiritual Nurturer is a program under the School of the Spirit Ministry, a Quaker ministry “dedicated to helping all who wish to be more faithful listeners and responders to the inward work of Christ.” The School of the Spirit Ministry was founded about 25 years ago with the recognition that Friends were hungry for spiritual deepening. The first teachers wanted to foster spiritual nurture that “combines a clear Christian grounding with the ability to listen and recognize spiritual openings and committed journeys in whatever form they appear.” They understood that “this rare combination helps to lead one into deeper spiritual understanding and brings forth a greater tenderness with each other.”

A Christian grounding . . . listening . . . spiritual openings . . . committed journeys . . . tenderness. Fran Taber, one of the first School of the Spirit Ministry teachers, says “that is where the dynamic lies — in our ability to hold and articulate and stand clearly in a place of solidity and depth — and at the same time to be able to recognize and affirm a committed spiritual journey in whatever shape, whatever form, whatever words it appears.” This is the kind of nurture that Jesus exemplified as he listened and recognized the spiritual hunger of his disciples on the road to Emmaus.

In our final residency, our On Being a Spiritual Nurturer class reflected again on the Emmaus story. We were reminded that this story is extraordinary and that it is a lesson for our everyday journeys. I return to the story now as I prepare to join the next class as one of the teachers. The journey to Emmaus is such an extraordinary lesson. Jesus comes to us as a stranger on the road. We listen to one another, offer one another hospitality, and see Christ in the breaking of the bread.

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