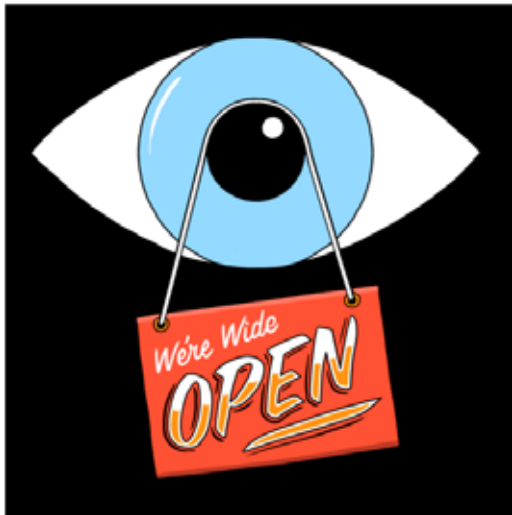


Keep your eyes open!

Pastor Hubert Den Draak, April 30, 2017

Scripture passage: Luke 24:13-35 (The walk to Emmaus)



I have great sympathy for Cleopas and his companion (who probably was his wife, since she didn't have a name; that's how it was in those days, unfortunately). So there they were, walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the first day of the week... Yesterday was the Sabbath; the day before that, Friday, was the crucifixion. Now, on this third day, it was time for them to go home, as so many others had done after they had poured in to watch the circus of Jesus' trial – and the horror of his death. And with his death, everyone's hopes for any real change to happen were crushed. Might as well pack up and go home, right?

From Jerusalem to Emmaus is about 7 miles/12 km, which is about a 3-hour walk. Along the way, Jesus catches up with them – Jesus himself! – and starts walking with them. And get this: they don't recognize him.

I kind of sympathize with them, because that's one of those things that can keep me up at night: "Hi, welcome to Pinegrove, is this your first visit here?" "Um, no, I was here last week, we shook hands and chatted. Don't you recognize me...?" Just take a sock, stuff it in my mouth and walk away, 'cause I'm done.

Cleopas and his companion did not recognize Jesus they had been following. They had listened to his teachings. Probably they had eaten with him. And yet, after all this, they did not recognize him.

The scripture says that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." By what? By God? Was God playing games with them for some unknowable reason? Or... could it be that they didn't recognize Jesus because of their *own* blinders, their own bewilderment and disillusionment after the crucifixion?

Most Jews believed that God's all-powerful Messiah would come one day, to rule with divine power. And then Jesus came, pronouncing that he was that Messiah, the Promised One. So Cleopas and many others at that time thought Jesus would wipe out the Roman occupying armies, restore King David's glorious kingdom, and "make Israel great again", to paraphrase someone we all know.

But Jesus did not fit that description, at least not in the way that people expected him to; Jesus used his power and might in a very different way. Instead of ruling over others, he would serve them. Instead of overpowering them, he would give his life for them. Lots of people did not recognize Jesus because of that. So could it be

that their eyes were kept from recognizing Jesus by their own preconceived ideas about what he was like?

Jesus had been crucified, executed; and people who have been executed don't walk with you along the road, striking up a friendly conversation.

Maybe they saw Jesus with their eyes – but not with their minds, and seeing really is a function of the mind more than it is of the eyes.

There's this fascinating story about when the first ship arrived in the New World from Europe, many of the Native Americans could not see it. It was right there in front of them, just offshore, but it was so alien from anything they had ever seen or imagined, that the mind refused to accept the image that was coming to it from their eyes. Their eyes saw it, but to their mind it was simply unbelievable, impossible; so the mind blocked and replaced the image of big white sails with something that made more sense to them: white clouds. So that's all the Native Americans could see: white clouds over an empty sea...

The eyes of Cleopas and his companion saw this man who looked like Jesus, who sounded like Jesus – but their minds told them it was impossible. And so, their "eyes" were kept from recognizing him.

I think that Cleopas and his companion could not see Jesus because of two good reasons. One: because common sense told them that what they were seeing was impossible. And two: because Jesus himself was not what they had imaged the Messiah to be. What they *thought* Jesus was like got in the way of what Jesus was really like.

It happens to all of us. I remember when I was a kid growing up in Holland how Saint Nicholas came to visit our kindergarten. I was maybe 6, and boy did I believe in Saint Nicholas! Even when I realized he sounded very much like our next door neighbour Mr. de Vries, even when I noticed he had the same glasses and the same smoke-stained teeth – I still didn't recognize him because I just *knew* it couldn't be him. My eyes saw him, but my mind blocked it out. (I still blame my sheltered childhood for it.)

If you take seriously your faith journey you will find that, at many places along the way, your ideas about who God is and what God is like are challenged. Each of us here has their own image of what God is like, there really is no getting around that. And none of these images that we have are completely true. No matter how mature your faith is or how knowledgeable you are, your image of God is fundamentally incomplete. We are limited by our own imagination, and always will be. That's why our faith is a journey; there is always a next step to take – and the next, and the next.

Author Anne LaMott once wrote that you know you've created God in your own image when your God hates the same people you hate, and likes the same people you like. Those who expected the Messiah to come with a certain type of might and power had created a God in their own image.

The prophet Elijah had that same hang-up. Remember the story? The king just had put a price on his head and everyone was out to get him. He felt desperately alone, and needed to know that God had not abandoned him, and God said, okay, I'll come and see you.

So Elijah expected God to come in a great windstorm; after all, in all those movies, whenever God is near, the wind is blowing. Cecil B. DeMille, right?

When God is present, cue the off screen fans to blow the hair and beard and ruffle the clothes, making everything flap dramatically in the wind. Elijah also waited for God to come in the middle of a great earthquake, and a raging fire. The obligatory special effects in any movie about God.

So Elijah had an image of God that involved powerful windstorms and earthquakes and fire. But God did not conform to Elijah's preconceived notions. God threw Elijah for a loop by coming in the midst of... calm and silence. The only way for him to notice God was by paying very close attention – to the silence...

We create God in our own image too, whenever we believe that God hates the same people we hate, whenever we assume that God is always on our team.

We create God in our own image when we assume that God likes people who vote the same party we vote for.

We create God in our own image when we assume that God hates gays and lesbians just because they make us uncomfortable.

We create God in our own image when we assume that God rejoices with us when a US army "super bomb" kills a hundred ISIS extremists, as was all over the news just 2 weeks ago.

So all of a sudden the difficulty that Cleopas and his companion have is also *our* difficulty. All of a sudden we realize we might not recognize Jesus if he came up to us to walk and chat with us. Maybe we'd even try to avoid him, maybe because he looks like a panhandler – or because his skin is brown, or red or black – or because he has a criminal record – or because he's a raging lunatic, harassing the money exchangers and pious know-it-alls and people in power.

Maybe that's not the kind of Jesus we would like to meet, the Jesus who talked with extremists and terrorists, and forgave them and gave them new life rather than telling us to blow them up.

So no wonder that Cleopas and his companion did not recognize Jesus. And yet, there must have been some sort of opening there, because they invited him to walk with them, and they listened with open hearts to all he had to say. It stretched their imagination. It expanded their minds. It challenged what they'd always thought about God. It was all new and different to them – still, they listened. And they grew in their faith.

When they reached Emmaus, they even invited this stranger to stay with them. They wanted to hear more, to learn more, they wanted to have their fixed ways of thinking about God be challenged further.

How often I wish more people – including myself – had that mindset, that eagerness to learn and change and grow, even when it's uncomfortable.

And then, in the sharing of a meal, their eyes were opened and they finally recognized him. They realized that the Holy One was in their midst. And at the very moment they did, Jesus... vanished.

How did he do that? Why did he do that? Maybe to make sure we don't cling to him but continue what he started... I don't know; there are no easy answers. It stretches *my* imagination!

All I know is that if I keep my eyes *and* my mind open, God will continue to stretch my imagination, so I can grow and not get stuck on my faith journey.

All I know is that every so often I have to remind myself that I have my own ways of imagining God, and that God is always bigger than that – always. Which means that there are times when I have failed and will fail to recognize Christ on my faith journey.

This wonderful story on the road to Emmaus is written for all Christians any time, when we – like them – wonder if Christ is travelling with us on our *own* road to Emmaus. It has the power to change our disappointment to joy, and our despair to great hope. May we recognize Christ among us whenever we break bread together – and travel together.

Amen.

Luke 24:13-35 (The walk to Emmaus)

¹³ That same day two of Jesus' followers were walking to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ As they walked along they were talking about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them. ¹⁶ But God kept them from recognizing him.

¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?"

They stopped short, sadness written across their faces. ¹⁸ Then one of them, Cleopas, replied, "You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days."

¹⁹ "What things?" Jesus asked.

“The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth,” they said. “He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people.²⁰ But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and they crucified him.²¹ We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel. This all happened three days ago.

²² “Then some women from our group of his followers were at his tomb early this morning, and they came back with an amazing report.²³ They said his body was missing, and they had seen angels who told them Jesus is alive!²⁴ Some of our men ran out to see, and sure enough, his body was gone, just as the women had said.”

²⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures.²⁶ Wasn’t it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?”²⁷ Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

²⁸ By this time they were nearing Emmaus and the end of their journey. Jesus acted as if he were going on,²⁹ but they begged him, “Stay the night with us, since it is getting late.” So he went home with them.³⁰ As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them.³¹ Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared!

³² They said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?”³³ And within the hour they were on their way back to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven disciples and the others who had gathered with them,³⁴ who said, “The Lord has really risen! He appeared to Peter.”

³⁵ Then the two from Emmaus told their story of how Jesus had appeared to them as they were walking along the road, and how they had recognized him as he was breaking the bread.