

Recognizing Jesus – Ben Wayman

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

I wonder if you have ever been on the road to Emmaus. I don't mean the road to the town about seven miles outside Jerusalem. I'm wondering if you've ever been on a journey where you recognized God where you hadn't seen him before.

About a month ago, I was on the road to Emmaus, and I knew it the moment I set foot on it. My Emmaus road was a book by James Cone called The Cross and the Lynching Tree. I'll come back to the book in a bit, but what I'll say now is that Cone helped me understand that when we can't recognize Jesus, we not only miss out on friendship, but we take part in crucifying him. So we must become a people who recognize Jesus. Too much is at stake.

Our readings today from Luke and Acts describe our journey to recognize Jesus as three movements of the heart. First, we're slow of heart. Then our hearts burn. Third, our hearts are cut. I don't know if your heart will go through these movements this morning. Perhaps you have experienced them already. But I think this is a journey worth making together, so I invite us all to take the risk.

Slow of Heart

Let's set out on Emmaus together. We'll start slow. The road to Emmaus is all about recognizing God. The question that emerges from this story is this: **Would you recognize Jesus even if he came near you?** Luke doesn't think so. He says as much in verse 25, when Jesus says to the two travelers, *How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!*

This story is dripping with irony. Here the two travelers have a conversation with Jesus, telling Jesus all about Jesus, all the while not recognizing him as Jesus. These two travelers think they have everything figured out. And Luke's point is they have no idea. They ask Jesus: *Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?* It's laughable...at first—until we realize Luke is a tricky story teller and the joke's on us. Here Jesus is not only telling the travelers, he's telling us **we're** slow of heart to believe.

I think he's right. Let's sit in this space for a minute, to consider how slow of heart we are to believe that we worship a Messiah who refused to fight in the face of outrageous evil. A defenseless God, a suffering God, a crucified God is not at all comforting and not the kind of God we have in mind when we use words like "sovereign" and "all powerful." Being slow of heart is being slow to consider the possibility that we may not have everything figured out after all—that we may, in fact, be wrong. And Jesus calls this foolishness.

To recognize Jesus we must not be slow of heart. We must consider the possibility that

we have been looking for him in the wrong places and the wrong people. In The Cross and the Lynching Tree, Cone makes us an offer not to be slow of heart. He invites his readers to consider the possibility that the least of these Jesus identifies with includes those who have been hung from trees in this country.

Cone shows that the end of slavery was not the end of white supremacy in America. He mourns America's amnesia about the lynching era—the period from 1880-1940, in which more than 5,000 African American men, women, and children were lynched. He traces the lynching era to segregation, to the resistance to the civil rights movement, to the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., to the prison industrial complex that continues to target black lives, to the present-day lynchings of African Americans. Cone points out that lynching is not always done with a rope or a tree. He expands our imaginations to see that lynching still happens, even today, and in many different forms. For example, Cone cites the death penalty as a form of “legal lynching” that is “primarily reserved, though not exclusively, for people of color.” (163)

Hearts Burning

What Jesus does with the two travelers is similar to what Cone did to me in his book. Just as the hearts of the travelers burned while Jesus was on the road, opening the Scriptures to them, so my heart burned while Cone drew connection after connection between the torture and execution of Jesus and the torture and execution of African Americans in this country.

Today Luke tells us we would probably not recognize Jesus even if he came near us. Would we recognize Jesus if he were hanging from a tree? Would our hearts burn too? Jesus tells the travelers a story; he starts with Moses and the prophets. As a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Cone assumes the story of Moses and the prophets, Jesus and the apostles, and he identifies the lynching tree as “Jesus' cross in America” (64). Can you see Jesus hanging from a tree?

My heart burned when Cone considered the parts played by the white church during the lynching era. Here's what Cone says: “White conservative Christianity's blatant endorsement of lynching as a part of its religion, and white liberal Christians' silence about lynching placed both of them outside of Christian identity. I could not find one sermon or theological essay, not to mention a book, opposing lynching by a prominent liberal white preacher.” (132)

Not one. Cone has a whole chapter on Reinhold Niebuhr, who's often regarded as the greatest American theologian of the twentieth century. Niebuhr is still the go-to theologian in seminaries all over the country. Barack Obama, in fact, called Niebuhr one of his favorite philosophers, and Niebuhr's legacy remains strong in American thought today. But Cone points out that Niebuhr failed to address lynching and the mistreatment of black Americans. He notes that Niebuhr discovered how divisive talking about race was and so he avoided it. And Niebuhr is not alone.

My heart burned as I realized that much of my own upbringing in the church and training in seminary had not given me eyes to recognize Jesus in the black lives who have been tortured and executed in our country. And this doesn't mean I didn't take classes or read books or have friends who tried to show me. I simply did not have the eyes to see it—to see lynchings as re-enactments of Christ's suffering on the cross. Like Jesus' crucifixion, lynchings were “public spectacles, shameful events, instruments of punishment meant for the most despised people in society” (161). They were announced beforehand in the newspaper, and sometimes thousands would turn out to participate in the event. Jesus has been re-crucified in this country at the hands of the white church, by white Christians like me. Cone writes, “The lynchers were the ‘good citizens’ who often did not even bother to hide their identities. They claimed to be acting as citizens and Christians as they crucified blacks in the same manner as the Romans lynched Jesus.” (159)

Cut to the Heart

Last weekend at our church's annual conference, a prominent leader in the church said to me that if Jesus were to come to us today, we—our family, the Free Methodist Church—would crucify him again. Cone of course would agree, and he'd go further: we are crucifying Jesus **today**. Cone is exasperated by the ways in which, “Whites could claim a Christian identity without feeling the need to oppose slavery, segregation, and lynching as a contradiction of the gospel ... What is invisible to white Christians and their theologians is inescapable to black people.” (159) The white church is re-crucifying Christ today because we can't recognize him in our persecuted black brothers and sisters and are silent in the face of their suffering.

I'm still cut to the heart by Cone's question, **Where was and where is the white church?** I think we here at St Paul's are trying to recognize the connections between the cross and the lynching tree. We're starting to see Jesus and the deep resonances between his suffering and that of black lives in our nation's history and even today. But if you're anything like me, you also may feel like the blind man in Mark's Gospel, who after Jesus spit in his eyes asked him, *Can you see anything?* And he replied, *I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.* I see people, but they look like trees walking. And I will keep seeing tree people until I can see Jesus in the black lives who continue to be executed and oppressed in this country.

I think the Black Lives Matter sign on our lawn indicates we're starting to see things clearly. The reason we have aligned ourselves with an explicitly secular movement that is standing for racial justice is because the church has not developed the language or the urgent conviction to state and stand with our black neighbors, who are being treated as though they do not matter in this country.

How slow of heart I have been to believe it was white Christians tying the nooses and lifting the bodies. How my heart burned when I began to see that white Christians have been lynching our black brothers and sisters like the Romans crucified Christ two thousand years ago. ***Brothers and sisters, what should we do?***

Repent! Peter has just the answer—repent. I must repent. We must repent. This is not just our nation’s history, this is our **church’s** history. Repenting is not merely about sympathy or empathy or regret or guilt. Repenting is about naming our sin and turning from it, turning from all the ways in which we are complicit by our actions and our silence in the crucifixion of our neighbors. Cone writes, “When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.” (158) We meet Jesus in the crucified bodies in our midst, and one way we do this every Sunday is in Communion.

At the Table Jesus, whose body was broken and blood was shed for us, comes near us. In Communion, we are trained to recognize Jesus as the one who suffered torture and crucifixion. At the Table we receive the One who is present today in the lives of those who continue to be tortured and crucified. May we become a people who have the courage to repent of our part in the crucifixion and re-crucifixion of Christ. And may God heal our eyes to recognize Jesus in the marginalized and oppressed lives both near and far from us.