

If I were to ask you to repeat our congregation's mission statement do you think you could do it? If you need a hint, see if you can find a church bulletin, because its been printed on the front of them long before I became the Pastor of First Lutheran back in December. Give up? In case you don't know it by heart, our mission in a nutshell is: "We are called to proclaim and celebrate the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are nurtured, prepared, and sent to be the light of Christ in the world." To put it another way, in essence, we are in the disciple-making business.

This morning, in light of the Easter season being all about the Risen Christ, and the forming of the early church, we are going to consider what it means to be a part of God's faithful people. We are going to talk about what it means to be a community of God's faithful disciples by looking at what we have in common with those first disciples and followers of Jesus.

There is a story about two men who attended the same church on the same Sunday morning, but each had a very different experience. The first one heard the organist miss a note during the prelude and winced. He saw a teenager talking when everybody was supposed to be bowed in silent prayer. He felt like the ushers were watching him to see what he put in the offering plate and it made him angry. He caught the preacher making a slip of the tongue several times in the sermon. As he snuck out the side door during the closing hymn, he muttered to himself: "Never again. What a bunch of clods and hypocrites!"

The second man heard the organist play an arrangement of "A Mighty Fortress" and was thrilled at the majesty of it. He heard a young girl take a moment in the service to share a temple talk about the difference her faith made in her life. He was glad to see that the church was taking up a special offering to help feed the hungry. And he especially appreciated the

sermon—for it answered a question that had been bothering him for some time. He thought as he walked out the doors of the church: “How can someone come here and not feel the very presence of God?”

Each man found what he was looking for. This story makes me think about a question that I am often trying to find answers to. What are people in this world looking for in life? Are they looking for Jesus, or are they searching for something else?

Similarly one may wonders something along these same lines about the followers of Jesus in today’s Gospel as they travel on a road from Jerusalem to Emmaus! What were they looking for, and why do they not recognize Jesus when they encounter him during their journey? Perhaps it was because they weren’t ready to believe. After all, it had been a terrible and tragic weekend for the friends of Jesus: Their Lord had been crucified and laid to rest in a tomb. The future that lay ahead of them seemed dark indeed. These guys from Emmaus had stuck around long enough to become students of Jesus, and to hear rumors of a resurrection, but eventually they left town feeling sad, disappointed, thinking it was all a cruel hoax.

As the two disciples were walking along together we can imagine them quoting various Old Testament prophecies while trying to remember what Jesus had taught them. For one reason, or another, they were unable to put it all together and to come up with an explanation that made sense. Was their teacher a failure or a success? Why did he have to die? Was there any hope for them or even for their nation?

Isn’t it wonderful though that during their despair and uncertainty Jesus catches up with them and graciously joins them on their hike down the road! A road that some of us might view as an escape route from the anguish, from the hopelessness, from the pain that they encountered

in Jerusalem after their Lord had died. As the three of them visit, the two men are dumbfounded that this stranger seems ignorant of the tragedy that had recently taken place. There is even a touch of humor in this story when Jesus asks them, “What things?”

The Lord had been at the heart of all that had happened in Jerusalem and now he was asking these two disciples to catch him up on the latest news. How patient our Savior is with us as he listens to us tell him what he already knows! Jesus plays it cool as he waits to see what they will say about the events that have unfolded during the last few days. Then when it is his turn, he begins to explain the sacred scriptures to them—and how it was prophesized that the Messiah would suffer, die, and rise again.

That must have been some Bible lesson, and I bet some of us wish we could have been there! Imagine the greatest teacher of all time explaining the greatest themes from the greatest Book of all time and bringing the greatest blessing to those men’s lives: eyes open to see him, hearts open to receive the Word, and lips open to tell others what Jesus said to them! Later those same two men will recall “didn’t our hearts burn within us when he was opening up the scriptures to us?”

Eventually the three travelers, finally arrive at the village of Emmaus and the two disciples urge their companion to stay and join them for a meal. And St. Luke records “*when Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. It was then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.*” Because Jesus became known to them in the breaking of the bread, the early Christians began the practice of weekly, if not daily communion. For they believed that the Risen Christ was

truly present with them whenever bread was broken and wine was poured. And isn't it beyond amazing that we continue in that same faith tradition some two thousand plus years later?

So why is it, or why do we sometimes fail to recognize Jesus in our midst? Why are we unable to see Jesus in each other? Brian Stoffregen, a Lutheran pastor in Yuma comments on this text, by suggesting that one culprit may be blatant pettiness.

One will find in our churches those who are like the man at worship, in my illustration earlier, who could only find things to complain about. Consider, for example, a flower committee chair who decides to quit because someone put flowers on the altar without consulting her first. Or a Kitchen Committee that is up in arms because the youth group took some sugar from the kitchen. Pastor Stoffregen suggests that churches are often so preoccupied with the petty, with the little things that they can't spend the time required to do what really matters, or even spend time staying focused on Jesus. I'm reminded of Peter when he stepped out of the boat and started to walk toward Jesus on a stormy sea. He got distracted by the winds and the waves, and when he took his eyes off Jesus he began to sink.

Pastor Stoffregen goes on to say that pettiness should have no place in the church. Petty people are those who have turned their eyes away from what matters (sharing our faith in Christ) and instead are focused on what really doesn't matter that much. The result is that the rest of us can become immobilized by their obsession with the insignificant. It is time that the church stopped ignoring pettiness, or pretending it doesn't matter. It is like a cancer that has been allowed to go undetected; a molehill that has become a mountain. It is a disease that can result in terminal cases of discord, disruption, and destruction.

We need to ask God to deliver us from the sin of pettiness so that we can become a community of disciples. It is only in Jesus that we are freed from the bondage of the insignificant, and let loose from the tyranny of the trivial, so we can use our energies and resources to carry out God's mission in the world. When we first started recording these videos for Worship, I know that those involved in getting them made were worried about how people might view them? What if some mistakes are made, what if the sound isn't perfect, what if the picture quality isn't the best???? Eventually we began to realize that the time, the effort, and the Gospel message we were sharing with others mattered more than anything trivial or inconsequential.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was martyred during WWII, wrote about Christian community in his book *Life Together*. He suggests that real and honest fellowship is messy and not some ideal that we can never live up to. Those who love their dream of what the community should be, more than the Christian community itself, actually contribute to its destruction, even though they have good intentions. He writes: "When things do not go their way, they call the effort a failure and see the community going to smash. So first they become an accuser of others, then of God, and finally of themselves."

Bonhoeffer reminds us that even when sin and misunderstanding burden our communal life, is not the sinning person still a brother or sister, with whom we stand together under the forgiving love of God in Christ? He concludes: "God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, so we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients."

We thank God for that, for what He has done for us. We thank God for giving us brothers and sisters who live by His call, by His forgiveness and by His promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us; rather we thank God for what He does give us daily.” For Bonhoeffer, Christian community was always a gift to be cherished.

So what does it mean for us to live as an Easter people, to be a true community of disciples? In our second lesson Peter gives us a clue when he writes: *“Through Christ you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God...so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew.”*

These are the attributes of an Easter community: First, our faith and hope are set on God, not on the things of this world. We can identify with those early followers of Jesus who were discouraged and blind with grief. The resurrection of Jesus restores our hope. Because he lives, we shall live also—now and forever. Second, we are to love one another deeply from the heart. We are bound to one another in a mutual love of Christ. And third, we are born anew—made new, transformed by Christ into passionate disciples by the power of the Spirit.

We have much in common with our brothers from Emmaus. We too are travelers on a journey. Sometimes the road we are on is rocky and hard. But we have one advantage that they did not. We know that Jesus rose from the dead, and that His Spirit now walks with us. This should make a difference to us. However, there are times we don’t always recognize that Jesus is on the road with us. When we are discouraged, or distracted by the things of this world, it can still be difficult to recognize Jesus. We live in an age of information overload and other voices can easily drown out the voice of our Lord. We have to be intentional about listening to

God's Word for us each and every day. The good news is that no matter if it is Sunday or Wednesday or Friday Jesus doesn't give up on disciples who are "foolish and slow of heart to believe."

Our gracious Lord did more than open the eyes of his companions from Emmaus. If eating together was and is a sign of fellowship, Jesus eating with those two disciples restores a fellowship broken by death. And just so with us. Imagine all of the times we have come to the altar to share fellowship with Christ and with each other. We came, not because we were worthy, but because we were invited. We came as sinners who were seeking forgiveness and healing for our lives. And in the breaking of the bread, the Risen Christ was once again present for us, restoring us to God and to one another, and creating among us once again a community of faithful and passionate disciples. Thanks be to God. Amen.