

Stranger on the Road

Pastor Ryan J. Scott

Somehow I seem to get stuck with the hard Sundays to preach. I had to preach after the Pulse Nightclub shooting and now I get to preach after the most divisive presidential election in modern history.

If I'm being honest with you, I wasn't even ready to address the election until Friday. It took me a few days to process and come to terms with the results. As I'm sure is true with many of us here today.

I've never been one to hide my bias, so I am sharing with you that I am deeply concerned with the results of this election. That's not to say I fault anyone who may have voted opposite of me.

Part of the loss I mourn with this election is that there was an opportunity to have a president who looked like the modern United Methodist Church. I mourn that we won't have president that looks like our faith tradition. I was filled with joy to have a candidate that spoke like me and called for more love and justice in our society, that talked more about John Wesley than most pastors do. I was thrilled to have a candidate with a combination of inner personal piety and outward social justice. So, today I come before you in mourning for what could've been.

I come before you with worry and doubt too. I worry for people who are on the margins of society, the poor, people of color, the disabled, LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, and anyone who felt belittled and bullied by this election cycle.

I also know that we may not all share this same worry and frustration with the results of the election, and that's what makes a church community such a wonderful place. Here we have to opportunity to be counter cultural and show the world what it means to love one another even if we find ourselves in stark disagreement.

The Wednesday after the election there was a meeting here at the church of all the Methodist clergy and pastors in Lane County. The plan was to talk about new ways to collaborate with one another, but we ended up sharing in our pain with each other instead. I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to be with to help me process what I was feeling.

Our District superintendent The Rev. John Tucker opened the meeting by sharing with us his take on the election. He said, in the tragedy of Jesus' death no one acted out of evil intent. Everyone was doing what they were supposed to be doing and Jesus still died. The religious

leaders were doing their job to protect the sacred rules and customs of their faith, the Roman soldiers were carrying out their orders, Pilate was listening to the will of the people and trying to ease the public unrest.

Everyone was doing exactly what they were supposed to do; which makes Jesus' last words all the more poignant. "Forgive them Father, for they do not know what they do."

The same can be said for our times. And the good news is that God gave us Jesus so that we could know God's love and be forgiven.

Even when we all think we're doing what we're supposed to do, even when everyone acts how they are destined to act the cross is still the outcome.

But the good news is that Jesus doesn't stay on that cross.

On the road to Emmaus in today's scripture, two of Jesus' followers were walking down the road lamenting what had transpired in the last few days. They were lamenting and mourning the loss of a dear friend and teacher, they were lamenting what could've been if he had just lived. And then seemingly out of nowhere Jesus unknowingly comes near to them.

They greet the stranger and begin talking with him. The stranger offers them some advice and teaches them all about the prophets. And then in the breaking of bread their eyes are opened and Jesus is revealed. In the sacred act of sharing a meal Jesus becomes real, he becomes the resurrected Christ.

The experience of the resurrection of Jesus is something that we all get to take part in! No matter who you are, we all have the same opportunity to participate in the act of resurrection.

The experience of the resurrection simply put, is the opening of oneself to God. Or another way of looking at it could be God revealing Godself within you.

The men on the road to Emmaus experienced this kind of participatory resurrection. Jesus opened the scriptures to them, and then Jesus opened their eyes so that they could see the truth of resurrection revealed before them in the flesh, and finally, just past where our scripture cuts off today, Jesus opens their minds when he appears to them in the upper room.

At a time when many of us are worried for loved ones and neighbors who are distressed by the election outcome, we owe to each other to walk the road forward. We owe it to the outcast and underprivileged to seek the love of Christ on the road; To seek resurrection on the road and then choose to participate in it.

You see, if the two men on the road had acted like people do now days I'm pretty sure they wouldn't be ready to see Jesus in the breaking of bread, probably because they wouldn't have engaged with the stranger in the first place, or invited the stranger to stay with them and break bread with them.

When we isolate ourselves from "the other" we are isolating ourselves from Jesus. And that is easy to do in a hyper-partisan world. It is easy to seek out people who look, think and act just like us. It's easy to insulate ourselves in our comfort zones.

I'm guilty of this myself. I surround myself, primarily, with white young progressives. And in doing that, I often find myself having a much harder time understanding people who do not think like I do.

We owe it to ourselves and our neighbors to proclaim that God's grace is freely and abundantly given to all. No matter what the people in power claim, you are a beloved child of God.

There's been a lot of talk about building walls during this election cycle, but the greatest wall that has been built has been the one that we have constructed between one another.

As we move forward down the road into an uncertain future, these walls that we have built are going to continue to get in our way and cause us to stumble.

It's time to start chipping away at the walls between each other. In the passage that Mike read from Isaiah today it lays out a vision for the future *where wolves and lambs graze together, lions and oxen will feed on straw; snakes won't bite or harm anyone*. This is what creation has to look forward to, a land of peace and tranquility, where all things are reconciled through God.

It is up to us, through the love exemplified in Jesus, and the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to look beyond the walls to see the stranger on the other side.

That stranger may not look or think like us. The stranger may be a conservative, or a liberal. The stranger may be an immigrant or a person of color. The stranger may be an impoverished family or homeless veteran. The stranger may be behind bars. The stranger might be trans, gay, or another sexual minority.

God is with us on the road, but if we aren't willing to engage with the stranger we may find it rather hard to leave the cross and arrive at resurrection.

To recognize the stranger is to recognize Jesus. To engage with someone who is not like us is to engage with Jesus. To love someone whom we greatly disagree with is the embodiment of Jesus.

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I got to tell you, moving forward and opening myself to the stranger is going to be hard. Specifically the stranger who supports policy that will undoubtedly hurt the very people I love and will jeopardize my rights as an individual; nonetheless, Jesus requires it of me to open, to break down the wall and build relationships.

Because it is through relationship and community that trust, respect, and accountability are built. When we can trust each other, and respect each other, and hold each other accountable, we can move towards a more just and God inspired world.

So I ask for your prayers. Pray that we can all move from this place of uncertainty to a place of relationship and trust building. Pray that we may be empowered to open ourselves to the stranger on the road so that we might catch a glimpse of the very face of God. Amen