

SEEING LIFE AS A SACRAMENT

Luke 24:28-35

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Avon Lake UCC
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(online worship only)

I heard something a couple of times this week, in conversations with people over the phone, and I read it in an email I received. It's almost whispered, as if the person saying it isn't sure it's an acceptable thought to express. It's a sentiment that is bubbling to the surface. I wonder if you relate to this at all: "I don't want to go back to normal."

One of the persons who said it is a friend of a friend, a divorced dad who works full-time as a nurse. He has three children, and usually they all participate in organized sports. Typically, he spends all of his free time and all of his disposable income on their activities, including buying gas to transport them to all of their practices and games. "I love watching my kids play sports," he says, "Don't get me wrong. It brings me - and them - great joy. But it had become too much."

He's not at all sure he wants to go back to that hectic pace of life.

One woman wrote, "Our whole family is getting along better. I love the fact that we eat dinner together every night."

And another person shares this: "I am focusing on what I have learned about myself during this time. I have realized that my needs are more simple; I can get by with less. I don't want to go back to the pressure-filled life I had before."

Let me be clear. I am not romanticizing this crisis. Our food banks are over-run. People have lost their jobs and are struggling to survive. Many who live with mental illness and addiction find every day to be a battle. Plenty of people are on edge and

feel anxious to interact with others, hug their loved ones. Not to mention those whose very lives are in peril from the disease or from caring for those with the disease. I'm not minimizing the pain and the grief that has come from this crisis.

But as we have talked about before, joy and pain can co-exist. The same event can cause two seemingly contradictory emotions and experiences. Good can emerge from a tragedy, and one of the blessings that is occurring for many people right now is the ability to view our lives from a different vantage point. Usually we are so caught up in our day-to-day routines that we don't have - or take - the time to reflect on how we think and feel. Now we've had that time. Think of it as a balcony view of your life. If you're always sitting in the front row of the theater, all you can see is what's right in front of you. But if you move to the balcony every once in a while you gain a different perspective. This time of change has provided us the opportunity to consider that while there are many things we miss, there are a few things about our previous lives that no longer feel like something we want.

Taking a balcony view is a useful way to gain a new perspective on an aspect of your life, or your family, your workplace, or an organization with which you're closely affiliated.

I have tried to use these past few weeks to look at the Avon Lake United Church of Christ from the balcony. We often joke that one of the nicknames of our church is "the busy church." It was not uncommon for us to have multiple events on our church calendar every single day of the month.

We were always intentional about WHY we were busy. We were never busy for the sake of being busy. Our activities were for the purpose of fulfilling our mission: “Growing People to Serve God and Others.”

Now that we are not able to be together in person, I am grateful to see that the seeds we planted in our busy days together are bearing fruit. Here are some examples.

One purpose of our activities was to build relationships. Many of those relationships are continuing. Members are in touch with each other on the phone and online. Our youth groups have not missed a beat; in fact, some of our virtual meetings have attracted larger numbers than when they met in person.

Our online worship attendance is healthy, as well; I believe that people find it comforting and grounding to experience the familiarity of worship from our sanctuary.

Probably the most hope-filled aspect of this time has been to see that our commitment to helping the most vulnerable has continued and grown. Mission is part of the DNA of this community. Every week we are delivering meals, gift cards and contributing financially to those who are in need.

My conclusion is that the church we were before is the church we are today. All that we had practiced together, all that we had studied, the songs and hymns we’d sung, the laughter we’d shared, all that life of discipleship - it shaped us into being the people we are today, people who are weathering this storm with our values and faith in place. I rejoice to see these examples of us growing people to serve God and others.

At the same time, these are some of my worries. I worry about new members, those who have recently joined the church and hadn’t had the opportunity yet to forge

relationships with others. It is hard to connect online or over the phone if one hadn't yet connected in person. I worry about prospective members, those who had just begun to consider a new church home, and those that would have visited over the spring and especially on Easter Sunday. I'm tremendously glad that we have a quality online worship experience to offer but I know it's not the same as having the opportunity to chat over a cup of coffee, take a tour of the facility, experience a small group, attend an Inquirer's class. I pray for new members and prospective members, for their ability to deeply connect spiritually with this faith community in this time.

One thing has become apparent in these past seven weeks - as much as we love our church building and grounds and especially our beautiful sanctuary, and look forward to returning, we have realized that we don't need it in order to practice our faith. We can worship and nurture our spiritual lives from our homes in these days.

We have eliminated the distinction, at least for now, that exists between what is home and what is church, between what we consider secular and what we consider sacred. Church is now the TV, or the phone, the tablet or the computer screen - and it's your kitchen table or your couch. Communion is bread or muffin, cracker or dinner roll. It's wine or juice, coffee or tea. The distinctions between what we consider secular and what we consider sacred have become blurred, and two things can happen in this scenario - either we are more aware of God's presence in our homes and everyday lives or we are less so. The best case is what many of you are reporting to us — you are truly worshiping at home. You are feeling a deep connection to the divine spirit and to our holy community. You are seeing your homes as places where all kinds of signs of God are appearing, things that — when life was busier — you barely noticed.

When we worship at home, we're worshipping the way the earliest church did. They gathered in one another's homes, sang songs, told the stories of Jesus, and shared a meal together.

When we worship at home, we are experiencing what Jesus taught us - that all of life is holy. When people ask Jesus what God is like, Jesus says, "Well, pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay." All of life is holy.

Our scripture for today is a story Luke gives us about what life was like for Jesus' followers after Easter. When our story for today begins, it's still Easter Sunday. Two of Jesus' followers are leaving Jerusalem, walking home, discussing among themselves everything that happened - the Passover, the last supper, the crucifixion, and the rumors that Jesus is alive. While they are walking, Jesus joins them, but his appearance is different. They don't recognize him. He asks them what they're talking about, and they tell him. He then begins to explain to them that everything that happened had been predicted in scripture.

They listen, but they still don't know who this person is. They invite him to spend the night. They offer him hospitality, a meal, a place to sleep. Do they do this because they are good Middle Eastern people, and hospitality is expected among people who travel long distances in the desert? Do they do this because they are people who have been influenced by Jesus who embodied radical hospitality and a spirit of welcome acceptance?

We don't know, but we do know that they share a meal together. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it. And then, Luke says, at that moment, their eyes are

opened and they recognize him. They go back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven disciples - it's true - the rumors are true - Jesus is alive. We recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

We call communion a sacrament, as we do baptism - sacrament is a word which means in our church, "an outward sign of an inward grace." In the sacraments of baptism and communion we are asking the Holy Spirit to use water, bread, and wine to make visible the grace, forgiveness, and presence of God in Christ. We are acknowledging that God is present in these ordinary elements of daily life, and that they can be tools to help us recognize the holiness in all of life.

What if we began to look for other signs of the presence of God? What if other meals began to feel holy? It happens sometimes, doesn't it? And it usually doesn't have to do with the recipe, but with the company. A conversation turns from trivial chit-chat to something deeper and more intimate. Stories are told around a table that link individuals with one another; other stories connect family members with their past. All of life is holy.

A walk around the neighborhood becomes not just a way to get exercise but an exercise in paying attention. Isn't the life-giving, resurrection spirit of God apparent in the beauty of springtime? Where is the line between what is sacred and what is secular?

Work in which you immerse yourself feels sacramental; you are drawing upon the gift of the creator God who created you to be creative, in God's image.

Anytime you give sacrificially, engaging in service that restores another person's dignity, you are tapping into an inward grace, making all of life more holy.

What if one of the lasting gifts of this crisis is that it deepens our awareness of God's presence in all of life? What if our homes start to feel more like holy places, the ordinary rooms and the ordinary objects in the rooms reminders of God's grace and love?

The writer Barbara Brown Taylor, when she was serving as an Episcopal parish priest, would often be asked to bless homes. She would walk through each room, lighting a candle and saying a prayer for the activities that would take place there. Here's how she describes the blessing of the dining room: "We looked at the table, set with the same kinds of dishes most of us ate on at home. We looked at one another's faces, gilded ever so slightly by the glow of the candles on the table. We blessed the ordinary bread and the ordinary wine, passing them between our ordinary hands to place in our ordinary mouths, and as we did so we were fed - by God, I should say, but also by one another. God has no hands but ours, no bread but the bread we bake, no prayers but the ones we make, whether we know what we are doing or not...for reasons beyond anyone's understanding, God has decided to be made known in flesh...the most ordinary things are drenched in divine possibility."*

In these times, so fraught with fear and loss and uncertainty, even as we acknowledge those very real thoughts and feelings, may we also look for the gifts and blessings. May we look, in our ordinary days and lives and homes, for signs of the presence of God. Amen.

*From her book, [An Altar in the World](#)