

Blessed Intimacy
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Sunday, 3 April 2005
Rev. Paulo Gustavo França
Text: Luke 24:13-35

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”

Luke 24:30-31 (NRSV)

Prayer

O loving God,
Wrap your arms around us
So we may feel your love
In the hug of friends,
In the smiles of strangers
And in this church community
Gathered in your name.
We pray that your Spirit will speak to us this morning
And will teach us to build a community
Where all may find a home
Without prejudice or favor.
In Christ's name, we pray.
Amen!

Last week I spent some time in New York City visiting a good friend of mine who has just moved there to start at a new job at Columbia University. This is the beginning of a new stage in my friend's life and I am glad I could take some time off to be with her as she adjusts to a new home in a new city. I also went to New York to rest, relax and replenish my spiritual energy after the exciting, but extremely demanding season that we all had at Fairmount Church during Holy Week and Easter.

Now, I am sure a lot of people would quail at the thought of going to a city as big and busy as New York in search of a relaxing and rejuvenating vacation time. For me, on the other hand, the experience of being in that cosmopolitan metropolis surrounded by all types of people from every nationality, religious background and socioeconomic level was very refreshing.

It was fun to sit at different cafés to write this sermon and to end up having casual conversations with complete strangers – people who, most likely, I will never see again. And, by the way, if you do not like my sermon today, blame it on New York!

I loved strolling along the crowded streets where street vendors, newsstands and piles of black garbage bags lying on the curbs determine the rhythm of the uninterrupted flow of pedestrians who walk by rapt in their own thoughts. But the real treat was not to have to drive at all for four days! [I do not like driving...] As a matter of fact I made no attempt to avoid riding the jam-packed subways during rush hour so I could be part of that huge living and pulsating human mosaic that makes cities, like New York, so vibrant, dynamic and real.

I definitely like New York's world-class museums, its trendy stores, fine restaurants and acclaimed Broadway shows, but it is the city streets that are most appealing to me. For it is the bustling and hectic life that thrives in the city streets that reveals that the barriers, which separate people, are nothing but contrived realities. Whether we like it or not, down deep, every human being shares the same basic nature and we have the same needs, dreams and longings. As the great sages of the East say, "***each one of us is but a drop in the infinite stream of human life and every human being is but a wave in the eternal strivings of the human spirit toward HOME.***"

For Frederick Buechner, human beings are part of the same life-long journey. On this journey, Buechner says, "***we search for a self to be. We search for other selves to love. We search for meaningful work to do. We search for happiness and fulfillment. We search for acceptance and respect. We search not only to be treated and respected as humans, but to become at last truly human – as Christ was fully human. And we search for a place to call HOME.***"

The German Romanticist poet Novalis asked a simple question that many of us have asked and will continue to ask ourselves: **“Where are we really going?”** And his answer was concise and profoundly complex. He answered, **“ALWAYS HOME.”** We are going always **HOME!**

HOME! What a compelling word that is. As Barbara Brown Taylor, the well-known Episcopal priest, says so pointedly, **“the human heart has a strong hunger for home, and what a hard thing is to find and keep a home – not just a building, but a place to belong – a place *to be from* and *to go to*. A safe place where one is known and a safe place from which to know the world: a nest, a family, a stable fortress in a vast and often frightening universe.”**

HOME for me is that place where life makes sense and where I feel safe and comfortable enough to uncover my most intimate feelings in expressions of tenderness in a totally fearless surrender. It is my sanctuary, the place where I rest, where I keep my books, where I dance to the sound of my favorite Brazilian songs, it is where I am fed, where I know I am fully accepted despite my mistakes and shortcomings. It is the place where I invite my closest friends to share a meal with me. My home is the promise I make to myself when I get too tired or discouraged and I can say quietly, “Soon I will be home and everything will be okay.” It is a place to escape the noisy world and to be re-energized.

HOME! What an elusive concept that is in today’s world. In a society where the average family moves every five years; where parents are post-modern nomads who have long commutes from suburbs to office parks; where kids are kept busy with school, sports, and so many other activities and where families have little time to spend together, where or what is home? Many of our houses are crammed with stuff, but devoid of the very essence of what it means to be a home. The pace of our lives is so incredibly fast that we hardly have time to get to know each other. We cannot afford to make time to listen to one another’s stories or to notice the strangers that come into our lives.

I do not know how many families still find time on a regular basis for intimate and life-giving moments of tenderness and openness without the distractions of TV or other exterior interruptions. I do not know how many of us really make any effort to cultivate meaningful relationships with those people who are part of our lives in this church, at work or in our circle of friends. Sometimes it seems that, in order to keep up with our work schedule, the next appointment or with all the demands of our busy lives, so many of us are willing to give up those very relationships that keep us human. Then we read the headlines of our newspapers and are astonished to hear about another high school shooting where a teenager – who was lost in his search for a place to belong - resorted to the ultimate form of violence to find his way home. Or you hear with perplexity – as I did - the conductor of the New York subway announce that the train will be delayed because another disoriented man is on the tracks trying to commit suicide. And we ask ourselves, where are we heading?

Today's gospel reading offers us some clue as to where we might be on this journey in search of home. We are somewhere along that same road the two despondent disciples were traveling on. Our transient society and busy lives lead us to that road between Jerusalem – the place where our hopes for a better life might have been displaced, thwarted or shattered – and Emmaus – the place where the lost sense of home can be regained.

We walk along this road completely oblivious of the strangers we encounter along the way - strangers who might indeed help us recover the sense of belonging that we crave for. Worse still, we travel together with our families and friends, but we are so focused on our losses and unrequited yearning for a place to belong that we can only think of our hopes and dreams in the past tense. And as Barbara Brown Taylor alerts us, "***Hope in the past tense [is] one of the saddest sounds a human being can make.***"

So in order to avert being confronted with the sadness of our emotional, social and spiritual homelessness, we go about our daily business with Antaeian determination while our lack of intimate and life-giving relationships remains unchallenged. Perhaps if we could really see those people who surround us and stop to listen to their life stories and drop down our guards so we might also become known to them; perhaps then, we would find our way home. But our tendency is always to assert our self-sufficiency and to look at those “strangers” who challenge it as friendly, but misinformed persons.

Then we come to church and the risen Christ speaks to us once again. He exposes our “homelessness” and invites us to look at each other and at ourselves through the lenses of a ritual that constitutes the very core of our faith tradition. Christ invites us to supper. At the Lord’s table we recognize our calling to be completely open and available to God and to one another. We take time off from the quick pace of life to break bread together and experience something we had almost forgotten, that we are indeed able to be vulnerable and to create the ground on which new relationships can germinate - relationships that create autonomy, self-awareness, freedom and mutuality. And we feel our hearts burn within us once again because in this new encounter with Christ and with each other we rediscover that we are not products of this fast-moving mechanical society, but humans. We are human beings who need and deserve to have strong, open, intimate, and loving relationships in our lives. We are human beings who can have a place to call **HOME**.

At the Lord’s table, we reclaim one of the most ancient signs of peace, forgiveness and disarmed acceptance that can build strong and loving communities. For at the table love and forgiveness manifest themselves in total vulnerability and we can see each other for whom we really are. At the table, we can taste the blessed intimacy of people who are at **Home**.

It is no wonder that the disciples' eyes were opened when they shared a meal with Jesus. In that moment, they realized they were **HOME** again. And their choice was to embrace that blessed intimacy and not let it simply go away. Even though Scripture tells us that Christ disappeared at the very moment the disciples recognized him, they were strengthened by that intimate encounter. And they went out to share their experience and to celebrate with the community of faith what they had so deeply felt. Their message is a message of hope for those of us who are looking for a place to belong. Today, when we break bread together and drink from the same cup, the Risen Christ will come to us once again and in this ancient human ritual he will show us our way **HOME**.

The young adults group at Fairmount Church has been reading the book "*Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*" by Anne Lamott. We are reading this book to help us to get to know one another as we talk about our own journey toward **HOME**. In the book, Anne Lamott recounts this story her pastor told her congregation about a young girl who gets lost and cannot find her way back home. A police officer finds her, puts her in his car and drives around town hoping that the girl might spot some kind of reference that will lead them back to her home. At one point, they drive by the little girl's church and at that moment she says to the officer, "You can let me off here. That's my church and I can always find my way home from my church."

I pray we will also be able to find our way home here at Fairmount Church. I pray that as we partake of the bread and drink from the cup this morning our lives will be blessed by this intimate moment. May we not only find a place to belong here, but may we also embrace with unconditional love and disarmed acceptance those who are coming to this church to find their **HOME**. May the Spirit of the Risen Christ be with us reminding us constantly that we are not alone, but at home here in this community of faith where the Risen Christ is always present. Amen!

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França