

“I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired...”

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Luke 24:13-35

“We had hoped...”

With those words, the disciples on the road back home to Emmaus summed up their devastating disappointment.

“We had hoped...”

We had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem our land and our lives. We had hoped that a change was just around the corner with Jesus as our leader.

“We had hoped...”

For many of us who have found our way to Circle of Mercy, we arrived in this gathering broken with disappointment and disillusionment from other people and places, and churches and church leaders, and—if we are honest—even with ourselves. High hopes slide all too often into the mud-hole of big disappointments.

The disciples had staked their lives on a new movement. They had given up everything to follow their leader. But he was gone, and their hopes vanished along with him. They sunk into the mire of “What’s the use?” And they headed back to the familiar of home.

“We had hoped...”

We had hoped things would have been different. We had hoped that we could have turned things around with...that disease, that decision, that division, that disaster. Who among us could not fill in the blank after “We had hoped...” or “I had hoped...”?

Our tendency to retreat into the routine, or retreat from the vision, or the community, or the relationship, is understandable and predictable. And a “pause” may, indeed, be needed. Much of our character is built and shaped around our response to the very human dilemma arising from the phrase “We had hoped...”

Like those disciples on the road of despair from dashed visions, Joyce, Ken, and I were hiking in the woods seven years ago. We spoke our “we had hopes” words. And then we were alarmed by the strange thought that we wanted to experiment with a gathering called “church” once again.

After the hike, we broke bread together, and we knew that the stranger in our midst was a holy visitor. We met Jesus again with his relentless word of hope. We knew him in the breaking of bread at that table.

From feeling that we had been complete failures as leaders in other religious communities, we said, “Let’s invite others to join us on a new adventure in church.” We decided not to show you our track record of failures as leaders. But it didn’t take long for you to know that we are flawed leaders. And yet, and yet...here we are. That’s Spirit work, for sure.

The charism, the gift of Circle of Mercy, that I want to lift high tonight—among many gifts that have been named and will be named—is this: We have the gift of awareness that everyone is called to discipleship in this church. You can come to worship at Circle of Mercy and not even know who the co-pastors are for several weeks. We take seriously the “priesthood of the believer,” incarnating our understanding that each of us is called to be a pastor to one another. We believe that there are no outsiders. We believe that we are equally called and variously gifted. It is an unlikely experiment in power arrangements.

The early church was galvanized by this wild notion. So they gathered...men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile...the Body of Christ.

With Jesus’ earthly body gone, the disciples caught the vision that *they* were the body of Christ. With an *absent* leader, they became *present* to the power of the Spirit leading them.

They incarnated a radical acceptance of the immanence of the Holy in this world. They did not run to the desert or become an “alternative” church. They lived a faith, born of discovery in their capacity to *be* Christ in the world—this messy, ol’ broken world. They did not choose escape or a fortified life. They chose to be gospel *in* the world.

The disciples went from wimpy to wow!

The disciples went from wimpy to wow! Their vision was ambitious, adventurous, and daring. It included shared leadership, shared finances, shared decisions, shared ministries. The church became an experiment in how people change, how transformation happens.

It was a risky adventure. The book of Acts is filled with story after story of the Spirit sweeping folks up and sending them in directions that they never thought possible, or never even imagined going in the first place.

Friends, we know that there are plenty of other groups, whether religious or not, that feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit the sick better than we do. We know that our resources are tiny in comparison to the great needs in our midst and outside of us. We know we could be a little bit of this and a little bit of that as a community.

We know that we have enlivening and satisfying worship experiences on a regular basis. And we could just keep on having them, and say to ourselves, "How good. How enriching." It is not a bad thing at all.

The question for us is not, how can we do things better? The question is this: Who are we called to be? Our questions are: Who are we becoming? And what grand adventure are we being called to?

And believe me, if we give ourselves to those questions, it will cost us. Time and energy and money and far too many frustrations. As it already has.

At the heart of the gospel is transformation, so how are we being changed, transformed to reflect more and more the body of Christ?

We can lift up so many signs of such a life among us. But we're also not there yet. We are not all that God has called us to be. We are people who are striving. We want to be people who *are* gospel. And we are, and we are called to be more. Not more in the sense of one more thing to do...but more in the sense of awe, seeing what God can do through us.

When we come together to worship, we straddle a threshold. On one side a foot is planted firmly on the solid foundation that we are fully loved, without reservation, forgiven and free. And on the other side a foot is restless, and ready to take a step, striving to hear the "more" of who God called us to be.

And that may take some more training, some more skills, some more praying, and learning to resist the temptations to despair. What are the resources we need now for this unpredictable journey? And who can help us with the practices that will keep us ready and able to respond to the Spirit's leading?

Next year we may have some people becoming more practiced in nonviolent action, or in centering prayer, or both. Or more groups going to Cuba. We may take steps toward becoming a Peace Church. Or who-knows-what. But how do we risk the Spirit-led adventure?

I hope that we will have a regular time in our gatherings for the stories of how faith is lived in our lives. We have already demonstrated this capacity wonderfully, but we will need to stay tuned into what the Spirit is doing in our lives. Our participatory way of being community is not just a lovely way to show our appreciation for each gift represented. Rather, our radical equality is essential for the building up of the Body of Christ.

We can't do this life alone. We can't see all the angles we need to see. Individual enlightenment is not the church. I need you to help me with discernment, and resources, and wisdom.

Don't we bump up against the hardest of questions from our lives: Is redemption possible? What does forgiveness look like here....or there...for us...for others? How do we live by mercy? How do we stand up against the forces of deception?

What is church? Is it sanctuary? Refuge? A place of learning a different world view? How are we missing the mark? Don't we need to remind each other of the powers and principalities that have a stranglehold on us, so we don't slip into their grip? How do we give ourselves to the possibility of being changed, transformed to reflect more and more the likeness of Christ?

Last Thursday night was the Annual Volunteer Banquet at the prison where I serve as a chaplain. Visitors from the East in Raleigh, from the state Department of Corrections, show up to laud the volunteers and tell them how we couldn't do it without them. One speaker said that the volunteers help us with the inmates for "transition and re-entry into becoming tax-paying citizens."

After the program, Mark Siler and I were accompanying four of the men upstairs, to put all the sound equipment back in the chapel. I said to the four inmates, "Before I leave here tonight, I just need to know what you all thought about the speakers and their wanting to help you." The four men doubled over in laughter.

Here we double over in laughter, too, about the many lies we are told. It is a spiritual discipline. Wouldn't we go crazy with all the lies if we didn't do that here?

One of the systemic sins we all experience is being stretched to the max in every dimension. We are not alone. The whole culture is on overload. We cannot sustain such a pace without serious damage to our bodies and souls.

A common response from people who return from a trip to Cuba is to be struck with the slower pace of life there. The Cubans have some things to teach us—and they have a totally different life circumstance.

Even when we want more times together for study, reflection, meals, play, and prayer, we are too tired, with too much pulling us down like gravity. So how do we stay resourceful, ready for the radical winds of the Spirit? I hope that we will give serious attention to how we keep Sabbath and the very best of what that means.

***The call to be the Body of Christ in the world
is nothing short of the grandest of adventures.***

Beloveds, the call to be the Body of Christ in the world is nothing short of the grandest of adventures. It will demand more of us than we are qualified to handle. But we are in good company. We have the Story. We have each other. We have the Spirit.

In the next year, we will fail. But we will also succeed in seeing stunning parables of gospel brought forth from this body. We will find more and more ways to celebrate our unique calling. We will find that it is very, very good news. We will have all the grace in the world to discover what is needed now for this body called Circle of Mercy.

*I don't feel no ways tired.
We've come too far from where we started from.
Nobody told me that the road would be easy,
I don't believe God brought me this far to leave me.**

Amen.

**Lyrics by Curtis Burrell*