

## “To Walk A Mile”

Date: 3 June 2018

Text: Luke 24: 13 - 35

Rev. Peter Coutts

Mary Lathrap lived in Michigan in the 1800's. She was a suffragette, a social activist, a Methodist preacher and a poet. Her poem "Judge Softly" is a word of caution not to jump to conclusions about people we see. The poem opens "Pray, don't find fault with the man that limps / Or stumbles along the road. / Unless you have worn the moccasins he wears / Or stumbled beneath the same load." The poem ends with familiar words, "Take the time to walk a mile in his moccasins." The poem encourages empathy. It is about understanding another person's perspective on their suffering. Recognizing their emotion and then tapping into a similar feeling within ourselves. The Ted Talk star and social worker Brené Brown says empathy is feeling *with* people. She says empathy is a vulnerable choice because to feel with someone else we have to find a parallel emotional place within ourselves...connecting with something deep inside us. When that happens and we feel with a person in pain, Brené Brown says "that is a sacred space."

It was only going to be 7 miles, but for these two travellers on the road to Emmaus it must have seemed like a thousand. Two ordinary men leaving Jerusalem, for reasons unknown to us, but we see them leaving with heavy hearts. The context tells us that they had been close to Jesus and part of that group gathered together with the apostles after the crucifixion. But now, they were leaving, and as they walked they talked of all that had happened in the last few days: their master's arrest, the scattering of the disciples, the crucifixion, and finally the so sad story that their master's body was now missing. My guess is that they may have been leaving for good, their hopes in Jesus dashed and dreams destroyed. With Jesus now gone, what point would there be of staying anyways? Have you known disappointment, loss, grief, demoralization? Do you feel *with* men leaving Jerusalem for Emmaus?

But then, in verse 15, "And it came about that while they were conversing and discussing, Jesus himself approached, and began travelling with them". They didn't recognize him. He seemed a stranger. And so anonymously he came alongside them, to share with them that lonely walk...and by doing so walked a few miles in their shoes. Jesus asked, "What are you talking about as you walk?" One replied, "Are you the only one who doesn't know what just happened in Jerusalem?" At this point Jesus could have easily said, "Ta Da! It's me!!" but he didn't. Instead he asked, "What happened? Tell me." He invited them to open up, tell their story, share their grief. And they did. The story doesn't say this, but I'm pretty sure Jesus *felt with them*. Empathy. Then Jesus helped them to look at their experience from a different perspective. To move beyond just holding the story of their experience...to move beyond that to understanding their experience from the point of view of their faith. So Jesus started to connect the recent events in Jerusalem to the Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament) and to the writings of the prophets. The walk and the talk became for them a sacred space. These travellers must have found the reframing of their experience so helpful that they strongly encouraged this stranger (Jesus) to spend the night with them. He did. As they shared a meal, "Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them....And in that moment their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (vs. 31-32). They had seen Jesus do this before, but a few days earlier. Now, Jesus could have revealed himself more directly to them much earlier that day, but he didn't. Jesus' compassion for them led him to 1] start with empathy (entering in to feeling with them), 2] to help them look at their experience from a faith perspective and then 3] reveal himself in the breaking of bread.

This table calls us to feel empathy. To feel empathy for Jesus. Every time we come to this table we ask Jesus, "What happened? Tell me again." As we hear the story told again...as we see it displayed

before us...as we enter the story ourselves as participants...we can begin to feel with Jesus and to see his experience through the lens of faith.

As we come to his table we remember his concern for the poor, the ill, the alienated, the condemned, even for the oppressors and sinners. We remember his teaching that inspires, uplifts and gives hope. We remember how he helped others, even to the point of exhaustion. Why? As we read in Matthew, "When he saw the crowds he felt compassion for them" (9:36). Have you even received selfless care from another? As we come to his table we also remember how he suffered. He was betrayed by one he loved, arrested, imprisoned, beaten, crucified. Then in agony, died. Have you ever known the pain of suffering in your own way? As we look at the table, do we feel with him? If we have empathy for Jesus we will appreciate more deeply all he has done for our sake.

Feeling with Jesus would be so very hard, if it weren't for knowing "why?" He said, I bring the living water. I bring life in abundance. I go to prepare a place for you and will bring you to myself. Life eternal. All this knowing full well who we are. So true that even on the cross he would say, Father forgive them for they know not what they do. At this table we recognize that: "this is my body broken for you....this is my blood shed for you." This table calls for our empathy for the one who first empathized with us.

It is still true today. When the bread is taken, blessed, broken and shared, our eyes are opened and we recognize the Son of God. Here we see the depth of Christ's empathy for us. Here we see the extent that Christ has gone for us...goes for us out of love for us. And like those two on the road to Emmaus we cannot remain the same. I'm sure they were changed in many different ways, but the one specific way described in this story is that they became mission-minded people. They returned to Jerusalem, rejoined the followers of Jesus, shared the message: "He is risen indeed!" And they told of their own experience of Jesus.

Seeing what Jesus did for us...seeing how much we are beneficiaries of his love for us...compels us to be mission minded as well. As it says in John's first letter to the churches, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). So we have to be a people of empathy: understanding the sufferings of others from their point of view, feeling with them, creating that sacred space where we sit together in that pain. And then, in love-driven mission, provide aid (minister) because Christ's compassion lives through us.

Which brings us full circle to Mary Lathrap—the Christian social activist—and her poem "Judge Softly".

Pray, don't find fault with the man that limps,  
Or stumbles along the road.  
Unless you have worn the moccasins he wears,  
Or stumbled beneath the same load.

There may be tears in his soles that hurt  
Though hidden away from view.  
The burden he bears placed on your back  
May cause you to stumble and fall, too.

And we'll skip to the end.

Brother, there but for the grace of God go you and I.  
Just for a moment, slip into his [God's] mind and traditions  
And see the world through his spirit and eyes

Before you cast a stone or falsely judge his conditions.

Remember to walk a mile in his moccasins

And remember the lessons of humanity taught to you by your elders.

We will be known forever by the tracks we leave

In other people's lives, our kindnesses and generosity.

Take the time to walk a mile in his moccasins.

Mission starts here.