

‘Presence’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
January 21, 2018
based on Luke 24:13-35 – The Walk to Emmaus

Please pray with me:

We come before you this day, Holy God, seeking your presence with us as we journey on the bumpy road to health and wholeness. Bath us in the light of your love so that we may see the path you have set before us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Every seminary student whose call is to pastor a local church takes a course (or two) in Pastoral Care. The class is designed to teach clergy wannabes how to ‘differentiate’ and how to master the ministry of presence.

In order for a pastor to differentiate, they must see the difference between their own personal experience and the experience of someone under their care. Training is required so that the pastor’s story (or experience) never infects the other person’s story.

Everyone’s story is unique to their personal context ... and in a ministry of presence it is important to learn to walk along side a person rather than lead them. It is more important to be a companion on the journey rather than an air traffic controller.

Let me give you a hypothetical example:

Let’s say someone comes to me because they are sad, depressed, or lost. They can’t see anything of God or the loving presence of Jesus in their life because they are blinded by grief and sadness.

Then, if they describe something so familiar to me I can’t separate my own personal experience from their experience, I contaminate how well I can companion them.

Therefore, a pastor ... a rabbi ... a teacher ... a spiritual guide, must master the art of differentiation – and learn to companion others as they travel their own spiritual journey.

Today we heard the story of two disciples of Jesus who are beyond sad and grieving ... perhaps even despondent in their understanding of Jesus’ cruel death.

They walk a road tread by many between Jerusalem and Emmaus. It is a journey fraught with the snares of the fowler ... therefore you would never want to walk it alone.

In this particular story, the road to Emmaus isn’t necessarily a trail laden with robbers and muggers ... but a road laden with the dangers and temptations to believe Jesus’ good news message died with him on the cross.

While walking along, the two disciples are joined by a stranger who walks with them through the treacherous path to disbelief.

This stranger walks alongside the grieving disciples. He listens to their story. He asks questions that help them understand their pain.

Jesus differentiates his personal, painful experience and guides the disciples to interpret their own understanding of what happened.

That is, in essence, the ministry of presence.

When we join a United Methodist Church we are asked if we will faithfully participate in the life of the church in our: prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.

Presence is (according to The United Methodist tradition) the second most important way we fully participate in the life of the church.

I guess you could interpret presence to mean you show up on Sunday mornings and are physically present ... but I think it's more than that.

To fully participate in presence is deeply spiritual.

In a ministry of presence we are called to walk with those who struggle; companion those who are grieving or who have difficulty maneuvering the demands of life.

In a ministry of presence we provide companionship and encouragement to those who struggle ... with life and with faith.

Presence never directs or dictates; - presence walks with.

It is so tempting to try to solve other people's problems or cast aside searching questions of faith. We are tempted to interpret others problems based on our understanding of life and our interpretation of faith ... but when we succumb to that temptation we fail to stop and consider where they are on the journey.

Here's what I mean by that:

Let's imagine ...

A young mother with two school age children struggles to make ends meet; she is dependent on aid from social services. Her level of education doesn't afford her high-paying jobs and the jobs she does qualify for are actually detrimental to the health and wholeness of her children.

One day her two children come home from school with a note from the school nurse that says her children are infected with lice. Before they can return to school they must be cleaned of any lice from their bodies.

It is the end of the month and the cost to de-lice her children is beyond her ability to pay. So her children stay home from school.

Day after day the young mother rushes to the mailbox to see if the aid check has arrived so she can get the store and to the Laundromat and get her kids back to school.

After a few days, the school sends a monitor to determine whether the mother has complied. Because she hadn't, the school submits a "failure to comply" order.

On the last day before her children were to be taken from her, she rushes to the mail carrier to see if the check arrived. It isn't there.

She freaks out and takes her anger and frustration out on the only person who is there at the time. The mail carrier calls the police; she is taken away to jail; and the children are sent to foster care.

The very next day ... the check arrives.

This may sound like an outrageous story; but I'm afraid it is an all-to-real story for many women in this country.

Much like today's Bible lesson, this story doesn't have to be literally true in order to represent a truth. This mother needed a companion ... someone to seek to understand her story.

How do we, as Christ followers who want to walk with those in crisis, walk with this young mother who now has lost her children and is in jail for harassing the mail carrier?

This is an imagined scenario. I use it because I believe the experience of that mother represents how we can be tempted to misinterpret and inflict our own personal

understandings and judgments.

By virtue of society's presupposed assumptions about this young mother, we fail to differentiate own experience and cast doubt on the mother's ability to mother and care for her children.

Imagine for a moment how Jesus ... who drew up alongside two grieving disciples along a treacherous path to disbelief and offered healing in a ministry of presence. Then think about how we, as Jesus followers, could walk alongside that young mother (as a metaphor for all who struggle) and companion them in a ministry of presence?

Stories such as this young mother are too numerous to count. What then, is the answer to our call to be Jesus' presence in a culture that presumes only appearance and passes judgment without learning the story?

The presence of Jesus drew up and walked alongside the grieving disciples. Then in the holy act of giving thanks and sharing bread together, grief turned to joy; disbelief turned to confirmation of their faith.

Jesus helped the disciples see that grief and sadness are signs that reflect deep love. And it is that love that feeds the most hungry ... the most vulnerable ... the most desperate.

The love of Jesus signals to the world – death does not have the last word and death is not the end of the story.

Jesus' story continues ... and we today are commissioned as members of The United Methodist Church with carrying on the ministry of presence.

As we look at our 8 Ministry Initiatives in 2018 we find a 'Caring Ministry'. This is a ministry that seeks to find ways to walk alongside the grieving; or those who experience hopelessness or loneliness.

Our most recent tag line for Covenant is: Hope is Within Walking Distance.

How do we live into that tag line that says share this space with others who need someone to walk with them along the treacherous road from Jerusalem to Emmaus ... or the road from death to life; hopelessness to wholeness; loneliness to companionship?

We also have an Initiative called: Ministry of Presence.

How well does Covenant's presence in this neighborhood represent Jesus? What do our signs say about us? What does our online presence communicate to the world?

Are we willing and able to commit to a Ministry of Presence that conveys hope and differentiates our own personal faith experience in ways that helps others to discover their own personal faith narrative in healthy and whole ways?

The most important thing about committing to companioning someone in a ministry of presence is to acknowledge you are Christ's representative. You are the sojourner who come alongside and walks with ... and it is in recognizing Christ abides deeply within you ... that you have the spiritual strength to accomplish the task.

In a ministry of presence we need Christ to abide deeply in us ... for only then will we know the difference between when we minister embedded in our own story ... or whether we lived embedded Jesus' story.