

“Walk to Emmaus”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

When I was in Seminary, I served a few different churches for the experience, and to make a buck, so I could survive. My first church, my first year of seminary, was a bilingual Hispanic congregation in a little village on the southwest side of Chicago. It was a really tough, challenging year. My second year I decided that I wanted to take it a little easier from the challenges of the inner city, so I decided to have a different experience and go to the suburbs. I would take the South Shore train down to northwest Indiana to a little town of Schererville, to the Hammond exit and they would come and pick me up. We had a wonderful year. In fact it was old home week this past week. Joan, our administrative assistant was down visiting friends in east Texas in a little town. She couldn't wait [to tell me] when she got back. She said, “You know those friends I was visiting last week.”

I said, “Yes,”

“I kept talking about Pastor Scott this and Pastor Scott that, and finally one day it just happened that I mentioned your last name.”

Well, there aren't too many of us, and all of a sudden the other woman said, “I know him.” And here it was - a woman and her husband (he had just passed away 3 years earlier), and they had two children, two girls who were in my youth group, in Schererville, Indiana, and they were all meeting together in Texas. It is a small world, isn't it? So, we got back together; hadn't been in touch in 32 years. So that was kind of fun this week; all thanks to Joan.

So my third year, I was going to be ordained at 24-years-old, and I said, “That is just nuts.” So I decided to take a year of internship and go to Florida for a year, because if you are going to go on internship and you are living in Chicago, you go somewhere warm. So I did a beach ministry in Florida. It was pretty cool and a great way to spend a year, and I got married and that was kind of nice.

I'm two weeks from going back up to Chicago with a new wife, and we are going to go to the south side of Chicago, so I could finish school. Well, luckily the minister in Schererville who I was with my last year - because he was trying to survive (because he had Parkinson's) to one more year, so he could get to retirement - and I helped him get to retirement.

The next minister from Merrillville, Indiana, they like their “villes” [referring to *Merrillville* and *Schererville*] in Indiana, called and said, “You had a good time with the minister in Schererville. I'm getting ready to retire before too long. Would you come and work for me for a year?” Sure enough, I did and it was an interesting year. I met some really great people there and I had a nice youth group. It was a really neat experience. So, at the end of that year I was ordained, and Jill and I took a call up to north central Wisconsin. We were there five years.

In my fifth year, I received a call from that church in Merrillville. Their minister finally retired and asked if I would be their pastor. So I went back to Merrillville, Indiana, and it was really neat because I got the youth group kids I had. They had grown up, and gotten married, so I got to find out what happened with them, and so became part of their lives as their pastor this time.

There was one young lady who got married to a very nice young man. He just had one bad fault - it was a bad fault: He was a Miami Dolphins fan and that was really uncomfortable. [Laugh.] But other than that, they were a great couple. I remembered her - like Ken was saying about his son, David. I remembered her when she was this high [gesturing small person] and now she was married and they were about to have their first child. It was such a neat time. We talked about how cool it would be that I would get to do the baptism, and it was just fun. We had more great times together.

Then one day she calls me - not like her - but crying and desperate. Could I get to the hospital? I got there just in time to find out, with her, that they knew something was wrong. They had done tests and the baby was growing to full size, the heart beat was great, but there was something that just didn't feel right. So, they did an ultra-sound and found out that that baby was perfect in every way except there was nothing above the shoulders, except a brain stem. We had to walk through what that mean, it was so late in the pregnancy. She gave birth, but it was their firstborn, and she would never be able to have a child that lived. We sat and talked about what that meant.

Whenever I read that passage on the walk to Emmaus, I always think of that dear young lady; because on the walk to Emmaus it started out desperate. One of the scholars that I was reading said that every emotion in the world happened on that seven-mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. You had the anguish: They were sitting in there - Cleopas and whoever the "other" Disciple was - agonizing because they had lost the person they thought was their Messiah. What were they going to do? Had they been hoodwinked? Did Jesus know that he was nothing more than a charlatan, or was there something more that they didn't understand? All of these emotions.

Then, all of a sudden, there is this stranger on the road and, while they no longer believed that this Jesus was truly the Messiah, they still lived what Jesus had taught. In the midst of their own anguish they allowed this stranger to go with them. They understood and accepted the hospitality that Jesus had proclaimed in his earthly ministry. While they sat there, visiting, they started talking about Jesus; sharing what he had done. But there was despair, because he had somehow let them down or wasn't who they thought he was. Then that stranger began to preach the Gospel back to the Disciples who had seen Jesus, telling them everything that the Bible had shared: all the glorious ministry, the teaching, the example that Jesus had set, and reminded them of all of the ways in which Jesus had already had fulfilled what the Prophets had described in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Still they really couldn't embrace it - but they liked him and wanted to help him, as a stranger in that desert road, on that seven-mile stretch.

So they invite him in to have a meal. It was in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup that they realized who was in their midst. When we break bread and share the cup

of communion we see Christ in various forms and in powerful ways that transform our world.

That couple I was describing went home that day from the hospital without a child. I sat down with them and started talking to them. Even though they didn't have a child to bring home, they were still parents. They had a child. They know how to love, how to be parents. It took them awhile, and I encouraged them to call each other mom and dad - because they were parents. Their child happened to die, but that did not keep them from being parents. I pulled him aside and said, "You better do one heck of a Mother's Day."

We talked and we shared. I said, you need to share this with the congregation, so they can help, because you are going to need all of the support you can get through this time. Sure enough, the congregation stepped up with food and with mothers. You wouldn't believe the women who sat down with her and held her hand, and said, "Let me tell you about the time I had."

You think you're the only one until you are brave enough to share your story, and she ended up ministering to so many other women who had kept their anguish quiet. They could cry and laugh and hope together. The man, who sat down with the older men, who sat with the father, taught him how to be a good husband, in the midst of his own grief; to be patient with her, to be patient with himself.

And they were there, and they grew in their love for each other when it could have separated them.

The Church brought and kept them together, and held them in their arms lovingly. The Church became Christ, because the Church *is* the body of Christ, according to the Apostle Paul. Through their Church they saw Christ at work: comforting them, loving them, and in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup each week in Communion they saw life again.

They had another child, but they knew that this - and we made it clear - this is your second child and the child was great, healthy, full, and we all celebrated on that Baptismal day. It wasn't that we were just celebrating their second child; we were also celebrating profoundly the way they had survived, and thrived, and loved through the tragedy and blessing of their first child.

They got from the point of enduring the pain that was so deep in their sides, to getting to the point that they could think about that child they couldn't take home, and see it as a blessing rather than a curse. They could experience that child with joy rather than anguish. They got to the point, with the help of so many brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, that they could not only think of themselves as victims or survivors, but as parents who had a story to tell and a ministry to provide.

He was so shy, but like so many marriages where one person in the relationship is one way and the other is the opposite extreme, she would talk your arm off. That was such a blessing, because she got to the point where she could sit down with other mothers in that church and in that community who struggled with preemies - one death that I remember and other situations - and she ministered to them. Those young mothers listened to her because

she had been down that road. In her anguish, she was able to care so much more profoundly than anyone else. But she was only able to get there because of the blessing of the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. All of those Christ-like individuals who wrapped their arms around them when they needed them the most - that provided the healing, and now she has passed on that healing to others.

When Jill and I moved to Iowa it was hard to say good-bye - but they gave us this picture: two loons and a baby. She said the baby isn't the second child. She said that is the other child. She named it. We encouraged them to name that child because they will carry that child in their hearts forever. I cherished this, but I cherish them in their story of resilience, faith and courage. And I have challenged every congregation I have served since, to be the body of Christ. To reach out. To not be scared. To offer the compassion and the care necessary to guide people through their darkest moments, so that they can bring life.

I see that here, in so many ways. In the way we care for one another and for those in our community; in the same way that Jesus, in that moment, took those two grieving Disciples who had lost their Messiah and watched them glow in the reality that the Spirit of the living God was still in their midst.

Each one of us must be the spirit in the midst of another person in need. Your troubled times should not be seen as a crutch, a burden or a failure - but as an opportunity - because you, in your unique pain, have the ability to reach out, to speak to and hold someone whose situation is similar and - because you are still living and you are still whole through the power of the Spirit - you can give them hope that in time they will be, too.

Have the courage to embrace your deepest struggle, and have the courage to reach out and to share your story, so that you can bring healing to another. Jesus did it on the road to Emmaus. This young couple did it so many years ago. And, we can continue to do it, in Jesus name, Amen.