

## **Sermon in Two Reflections**, by Heather and John-Michael Cotignola-Pickens

### **Heather Cotignola-Pickens:**

If grief is love without a place to go...

John-Michael and I have been reflecting on this text in Luke about Jesus meeting travelers on the road to Emmaus and both noticing the uncertainty and grief there, and how that can connect to our current time. We each have a brief reflection about these themes that we are grateful to share with all you now.

So, a couple of disciples meeting Jesus on the way to Emmaus, without knowing that it was Jesus. There is so much uncertainty in this passage, Who is Cleopas anyway? And his companion? Where is Emmaus and why are they going there? And then they meet this stranger who is oblivious to everything that has happened and then calls them foolish and proceeds to deliver a lecture about the interpretation of scripture----- I'm not sure if I would be rushing to invite him over.

So, Jesus meets his followers on the road in their grief, in their uncertainty and perhaps adds to their confusion.

I've been thinking about Jesus meeting us in our grief and uncertainty during this time and what that could look like—and how am I missing it?

Now, when we are experiencing all kinds of collective grief from so many different types of losses, as well as deep uncertainty. The anticipatory grief of what could be lost or how things may change. The unknown of what next month or next year could look like as we realize things we thought were certain or dependable may not be.

Personally I was surprised at my intense anger at Zoom, for the mental and physical strain and perhaps how it represents the loss of physical connection-- even though I also appreciate how it can connect us. I was also shocked by how stressed and overwhelmed I became when John-Michael was sick and tested negative for the flu. A part of me suddenly feared complete isolation at the word "quarantine" and even after he has been better it has taken weeks for me to acknowledge that though social connection has changed, I am still very connected and deeply grateful for that.

I am also aware of so many other losses. The loss of jobs, physical connection, health, loved ones, routines, previous ways of social connection. The deep sorrow of not being able to visit a sick or dying loved one, or the isolation experienced by those who are sick or dying during this time. I think many of us have been struggling with what to do or what we can do, I know I have.

Though the circumstances are different, this deep grief and uncertainty seems to be present with the travelers on the road to Emmaus. They had hoped Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel, but it didn't seem like that when he died, and who knows right now? And what to even think about the empty tomb?

We feel this deep longing for redemption that feels so uncertain, this longing isn't new but perhaps it is amplified in our hearts right now. As more of us see how badly our communities need it. Or perhaps how we become disheartened at other's responses—and blaming them for where they are placing blame.

Yet Jesus did and is redeeming, but his form of redemption was unexpected, much like his presence on the road to Emmaus. And perhaps we are still trying to figure out what this redemption even looks like.

Our grief, our feeling of doubt or uncertainty about redemption and how that is possible, our many losses, even those that are hard to name can leave us feeling overwhelmed and even more isolated than how we are separated through social distancing.

Our grief is our love when don't know how to love. Like sadness, it tells us what we value, what we hold dear and how for whatever reason it feels out of reach right now.

So what do we do with this grief? With this love that can create an empty space inside when it has no other place to go?

The followers of Jesus on the road continued to reach out through or perhaps with their grief. And through this hospitality, the intimacy of a meal (which perhaps we are all recognizing the preciousness of these days) Jesus revealed himself to them.

We can do likewise. Looking for and creating unexpected redemption. We sit in Jesus' presence, we work towards the redemption of our neighbors, we join together as a community, we show love to those we don't understand and reach out with kindness and curiosity (at a safe distance).

And maybe it is in these acts of love, noticing hope, proclaiming the resurrection and that redemption is possible is one way we can meet Jesus now. We can be open to seeing Jesus where we may not think, (maybe I can see how Jesus can work over Zoom?) How we understand just how deeply essential not only our healthcare workers our, but our grocery store workers and delivery truck drivers. That we all need each other and must depend on each other. That we have both a responsibility and an opportunity to care in tangible ways. May Jesus open our eyes in new ways. Whether it is seeing the underlying racist structures of our society that seem even more pronounced as COVID-19 disproportionately impacts people of color-- or acknowledging that maybe liberal progressivism doesn't have all the answers. And we can be open and curious to how Jesus is meeting us, both challenging us, comforting us, and sharing this space and this time with us.

And it is in these uncertain and novel times that we can find love and connection in new and surprising ways. Which seems to me what meeting Jesus looks like.

### **John-Michael Cotignola-Pickens:**

I was reminded of the Grief Cycle this week, specifically the anger stage. The reminder came in the form of a large group of protestors that gathered outside of the capitol building just a couple of miles away from our house earlier this week. They waved signs such as, "Jesus is my vaccine", many weren't wearing masks and they weren't practicing social distancing, and several felt the need to bring firearms with them. I am by no means condoning the protestors' actions, quite the contrary, I was enraged at their selfishness for risking their lives and others' lives to practice their First Amendment Rights. I was aware of the racial makeup of the crowd, which was predominantly, if not almost completely white. Professor and author Ibram Kendi stated the reaction to the protests from law enforcement and the country would be completely different if the group was made up of Black people, which is unfortunately true. Racism continues to rear its sinister head through disproportionate rates of COVID-19 in communities

of color and millions of people of color not having the privilege of working from home and Asian-Americans experiencing an increase in racist attacks fueled by white supremacy. Despite my own anger at the protestors I was reminded by a Facebook friend of mine, who also wasn't condoning their actions, that millions of people have lost their jobs and are legitimately angry at how this pandemic has disrupted our lives. We are collectively grieving and are struggling with how to express our grief as a state and as a nation.

The Gospel reading for this week finds Jesus' followers in a state of collective grief as well. Cleopas expresses to the stranger, who unbeknownst to him is Jesus, that they had hoped that Jesus would redeem Israel, which I interpret as liberating them from the oppressive Roman government. But instead Jesus' followers are dismayed by Jesus' crucifixion and have no idea of what's to come. They are grieving the loss of the leader they put so much hope in. Jesus' response to this grief? He has a meal with the strangers he meets on the road. It is in the blessing of the meal that he's

recognized by Cleopas and his unnamed companion. This is one of the distinctive traits of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus breaks barriers by eating with people who are labeled as “sinners” such as tax collectors. It is in the mundane and intimacy of sharing a meal that Christ demonstrates to his followers who is a part of God’s Kingdom and how he demonstrates his presence amidst their grief. It is in the mundane tasks of preparing a meal and feeding people that I often feel the closest to my Mom who passed away nearly 10 years ago.

She was an excellent cook and demonstrated her love for friends and strangers alike by preparing them a meal. I continue to process my grief and feel nearest to God at times while sharing a meal. It is during these uncertain times that I’ve been reminded of the importance of the beauty of the everyday and how God shows up in those moments. Processing our collective grief as a country unfortunately can’t include sharing meals together, but I have been inspired from stories I’ve heard of communities rallying around healthcare workers through donating thousands of masks, restaurants that have donated meals, and people my age and younger rediscovering the ability to call friends and family out of the blue which helps us stay connected.

The Luke text reminds us that Jesus is present while we collectively grieve and shows up in unexpected ways. I pray we find comfort in that. Our grief does not however give us permission to neglect Christ’s commandments to love our neighbor as ourselves and to work for justice, which look differently during a pandemic. Loving our neighbors during this time looks like staying home if you’re able to, wearing masks, which protects the vulnerable from getting sick and finding ways to speak out against systemic racism that fuels attacks against people of color and the protests that have taken place recently calling for states to re-open.

Friends, I hope we find comfort in knowing that Jesus dwells with us amidst our grief and that there is beauty in the everyday. Let us continue to find ways to care for each other, to be community and to find healthy ways to express our collective grief.