

Easter Love, or How Love Is

A sermon preached by Lee Cheek, Lay Preacher, Grace Episcopal Church @ Crissey Farm, Great Barrington, MA 4-30-17 Easter 3A, Luke 24:13-35

Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, Love divine;
love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign.

I've always loved this poem by Christina Rossetti because I wanted it to be true. The Church has always said it is only through the lens of Easter that we can really know that God's Unfathomable Love was decanted into our world in the woman-born body of a 1st century rabbi named Jesus.

This morning, I'd like to share a little reflection on the story about how two companions on the road to Emmaus were found by this decanted Love and received their "Easter Eyes."

Every detail in Luke's story is saturated with signs of what this Love is like. First of all, notice that Cleopas' companion could be anyone, like "N." which stands for the Latin "nomen," or "name," that we see in our prayer book. N. could even be a woman!

Love always makes room for each and every one to be in the picture anywhere we go. Maybe other people do not want us there, but Love always does.

So I feel invited by Luke to imagine myself on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Did you know that in those days, there were at least four of them around Jerusalem? That means that Emmaus could be anywhere. Something else to notice is that Emmaus is in the opposite direction from Jerusalem. For the companions, Emmaus is in the direction away from the scene of the disastrous Passover weekend. For us, it is the direction away from anything we don't understand, or don't want to think about, or look at in ourselves or anyone else.

Luke tells that Cleopas and N. were on the road away from Jerusalem, deep in discussion, when Jesus — dead and risen — appeared and asked them what they were discussing. They did not yet have the eyes to recognize him, but Jesus finds them, the two of them gathered together in their confusion.

There's another sign of that decanted Love: *Love finds us when we are walking together after our failures and wants to hear what's on our hearts.*

They tell Jesus all they know — a mishmash of things they can make no sense of. What seems to grieve them the most is the failure of Jesus' plans to redeem Israel — or to be more accurate, what they THOUGHT were Jesus' plans for Israel's redemption.

What would they do now? Who were they if they were not players in a project to make their nation, once great, the way it used to be?

Jesus offers to help them makes sense of these scattered facts by proceeding to interpret the scriptures from Moses through the prophets. For Cleopas and N., these were familiar texts. This was their religious and national history — their very identity.

But through the eyes of a Forgiving Victim, their texts were opened up, and who they took themselves to be was beginning to become something bigger and more creative than they had ever imagined. *Love is like that. Love enables us to see ourselves differently — not just as the worst thing we have ever done or been a part of. We are not just our failures.*

Now at this point in the story, Jesus doesn't insist on their company. He doesn't even go over everything he's said again just to make sure they got it. It even appears he is traveling on, not waiting around unless he is invited to further companionship. *Love is this way, too. It does not insist on or demand our company.*

So Cleopas and N. invite him to stay. But in a surprising reversal Love, the guest, becomes Love, the host: Jesus took the bread, blessed the bread, broke the bread and gave it to them. It was at this very moment that their eyes were opened and they were able to see him as their dead-and-now-living friend and rabbi. He vanished, out of their sight, or in the Greek, "he unappearing became."

Does Love insist that we grasp it and hold on to it? *Or does Love simply decant itself into us, at the table of Love's feast wherever it is set and thus enable us to freely decant it ourselves, anywhere and everywhere else?*

Evidently. For with burning hearts they rushed back to Jerusalem, filled with Love's generous and forgiving regard of them, to tell everyone that decanting Forgiving Love everywhere on earth was always God's project.

Since then, we have made our religion of Christianity into a way of looking out at the world with suspicion, seeing problems [in others — or ourselves] that need moralistic prescriptions. We withhold the healing balm of connection, humility, and mutuality until it's "earned."

But Love knows all that about us. Always has! And is waiting on our roads-to-anywhere to set a table for us, a feast of forgiveness to remind us that we are not the worst thing we've done.

The preacher acknowledges the brilliance and heavy theological lifting of James Alison, and borrowed heavily from Essay 2, "Emmaus and Eucharist," from his course for small groups, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice* (www.forgivingvictim.com)