

# The Many Faced God

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## TODAY'S PASSAGE

1 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee.

13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. 15 As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; 16 but they were kept from recognizing him.

17 He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem

who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

19 “What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of the women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

25 He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. 29 But they

urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. 32 They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

Luke 24: 1-6 and 13-32

## FACES THAT WE CAN'T REMEMBER

You ever have those moments where you're talking with someone and you feel like you've met them before somewhere? This happens a lot in my life.

You meet someone at some type of a gathering and you're about 50/50 on whether or not you know them, so your mind starts working the question.

- Maybe they just look like someone you've met before.

- Maybe you did meet them before but you don't want break the ice and sound weird, so you just investigate (conversationally speaking) for a minute.

We start to triangulate the person with easy questions, hoping to pinpoint the location at which we might have met them.

What neighborhood do you live in?

Where do you work? Oh yeah, so do you know so and so there?

Where do you hang out?

What are you into?

Oh yoga, yeah? Where do you go? Ahhh yes, that's it! I know you from so and so's class on Wednesdays!

And in that moment, it's strange. One minute you're unsure who they are, but then something clicks, and in a split second it all becomes clear.

You remember.

## EMMAUS

The story that we just heard in our gospel reading is almost like that.

Two men are on a seven mile walk together and someone comes alongside them on the road. They don't recognize him, but he asks them what they're talking about, and they welcome him into the conversation. They ask him questions and he asks them questions.

It starts to get late so they stop for the night, and as they're sitting down at the table to eat, this person that they don't recognize begins passing the bread, and then they remember who he is and how they know him. The subject matter that they'd been discussing for the entire journey is sitting right there in front of them.

And they look back and say a strange phrase. They ask,

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

But here's the thing. In spite of all the life that they felt coming from this unknown man as he talked with them on the road, they still didn't recognize him.

They didn't recognize him until they sat down and ate a meal with him.

It was in the common—the conversational — not the miraculous where they recognized this man as Jesus.

## DECLINE

Christianity is declining in America.

Sarah Bailey wrote an article in the Washington post about the decline of church attendance in America, and the stats that she quotes are kind of alarming.

- There are 3 million fewer Catholics today than there were in 2007.
- There are 5 million fewer mainline Protestants than there were in 2007.
- About 10 percent of the U.S. population say they were raised in the mainline Protestant tradition, while 6 percent have converted to mainline Protestantism.
- Evangelical Protestants have experienced less decline, due to their net positive retention rates. For every person who has left evangelical Protestantism after growing up, 1.2 have switched (meaning Catholics and Mainline Protestants) to join an evangelical denomination.

So even though it may look like growth, it's not really growth at all. It's just fewer

people moving around, changing affiliations.

Why is this happening? I'll tell you why, and it's not the fault of people who for one reason or another can no longer relate to the church.

As I observe these trends and as I sit and listen to those closest in my life about their disconnects with this thing that with the church, I start to see what the problem is. It's those of us in leadership failing to lead and teach in such a way that comes alongside of people to help them process and think. Instead, we tell people what its appropriate to process and what to think.

We don't do a good job of teaching people how to have an experience with God, but rather just how to make sense of God intellectually.

And though that in needed, and noble, and good, it's incomplete.

A text from the 14th century about the topic of contemplative prayer called "The Cloud of Unknowing," a book that has had a huge impact on my own life says it well, when it says:

"For God can well be loved, but cannot be thought. By love God can be grasped and held, but by thought,

neither grasped nor held. And so I urge you, go after experience rather than knowledge. On account of pride, knowledge may often deceive you, but this gentle, loving affection will not deceive you. Knowledge tends to breed conceit, but love builds. Knowledge is full of labor, but love, full of rest.”

That’s good, right?

And strangely enough, this is precisely what we see in this story. Jesus is explaining the scriptures, imparting the knowledge, bridging gaps in their intellect, and tying off a long frayed rope of ancient prophecies, but it still wasn't enough for these two men to recognize him.

They recognized him over a meal. Something everyday. Something mundane. Just sitting down and eating with him.

It’s why scripture would say later on, a passage that has often been used to keep people out rather to invite them in,

“Here I am! I stand at your door and I knock. If you hear me, open the door, and I will come in and we will eat a meal together.” - Jesus

This is all that God wants. God just wants to be with his children. All else is commentary. I don't want anything from my kids. I want things for them. They don't have to perform for me. I just want to be with them, to walk with them, to sit with them, to laugh with them, and to put the band aids on and hold them when they get hurt.

Oh that we would see this about the Father of our Humanity. That he dignifies us in Jesus. Jesus is God's attempt to sit with us simply God wants to— not to get us to perform or behave.

Wherever you are on the spectrum of belief this morning, I urge you, go after experience rather than knowledge. Go after that which causes your heart to burn within you, that space inside of you that is untouched by the storms of this life— that spot that speaks to you in whispers, reminding you that you are infinitely and completely.

As weird and frightening as it may sound, take time to sit with God at the table in your heart, and make time to sit at tables with many others, seeing Christ in them.

What if that's as difficult as it gets? What if that's the main thing that we are responsible for as people of faith— to simply sit with people at tables and let

them see Christ in us and to see Christ in them?

Let that be our witness.

Let that be our work.

Let that be our place in the world— a world that (often) seems all too crowded with those who are trying to keep people away from God's table.

We can reverse that trend with something as simple as a conversation, a drink, or a meal.

May we be known as people of tables. Where we sit and marvel at God's many faces.

Amen.