

“Other Sighted”

Today’s Gospel lesson is kind of a flash back. We are already two weeks past the Resurrection, but this lessons takes us back to that day of confusion, anguish, and pain that so many of Jesus’ followers experienced, including these two people walking down from Jerusalem toward a town called Emmaus and seven miles from Jerusalem.

One was named Cleopas and the other traveler is unnamed. It is possible that Luke did not name this person so that we could imagine ourselves in that place. We are Cleopas’ companion and fellow witness.

As they walked they discussed the events of what we call Holy Week. They wondered where everything went wrong. Just a week ago they were walking into Jerusalem and their leader was being hailed as a new messiah; one anointed by God to free his people. But by week’s end everything was turned upside down, as they watched helplessly as Jesus was arrested, tried, and put to death on a cross.

As they walked their discussion was quiet so as not to attract attention from any other traveler. When all of a sudden another someone joined up with them. This traveler seemed to know nothing of the events that were so confusing to them. Somehow he had been in Jerusalem and had missed it all. Yet, when they explained them to him he responded telling them it had to be that way. Then Luke tells us “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” They were fascinated, but still they could not see that it was Jesus.

His closest of friends and followers struggled to comprehend when he foretold of his death and resurrection. Because it was outside of what they could conceive of or hope for so they forgot about it. Only when Jesus did something familiar and unique, in this case when “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” were their eyes opened to see that it was Jesus.

I want to share with you a painting by Velázquez.¹ The painting is remarkable for any number of reasons. First of all, prior to it being cleaned it was considered a simple, if beautiful character study, of the maid in the painting. However, when the painting was cleaned the figures in the upper left corner were illuminated. Suddenly, the painting takes on a new perspective and meaning. While the clear visual emphasis is on the woman in the foreground, after the cleaning one can see in the background Jesus and his two companions on the road to Emmaus.



As we look at the serving woman we see that she is not in the middle of her serving tasks rather she intently tending to the conversation between the three men. She is trying to put the pieces together. She has seen this man before teaching,

¹ National Gallery of Ireland. <https://www.nationalgallery.ie/art-and-artists/highlights-collection/kitchen-maid-supper-emmaus-diego-velazquez-1599-1660>

preaching and healing. She has heard his powerful and life-giving words. Even in the midst of the crowd she had felt a connection with him and his message.

She might be an outsider in this land and culture, but she was not an outsider to him. This Kingdom of God he was describing included her and people who looked different, who were poor, who made mistakes, and who stood in the wrong places in society. His message said that they all matter to God even in the midst of their labors and sins. She did not need to have the big words and the proper accent to talk with this God.

What's more she had heard the news that this same man had been put on trial, condemned and executed. How could it be that he was sitting here in the flesh talking with these two men? Why were the two men oblivious to who he is, when it was so obvious to her? Her head is cocked and her eyes are averted. She holds onto the table for stability as she realizes the enormity of the situation.

Denise Levertov in her poem "Servant Girl at Emmaus" which was based on her viewing of this painting by Velázquez wrote the following.

She listens, listens, holding
her breath. Surely that voice
is his—the one who had looked at her, once, across the crowd,
as no one ever had looked?
Had seen her? Had spoken as if to her?
Surely those hands were his,
taking the platter of bread from hers just now?
Hands he'd laid on the dying and made them well?
Surely that face—?
The man they'd crucified for sedition and blasphemy.
The man whose body disappeared from its tomb.
The man it was rumored now some women had seen this morning, alive?
Those who had brought this stranger home to their table
don't recognize yet with whom they sit.
But she in the kitchen, absently touching the wine jug she's to take in,
a young Black servant intently listening,
swings round and sees
the light around him
and is sure.²

Many of us seem unable to recognize God at work; while others whose expectations are not clouded by preconceptions can see rightly and hear clearly. Let us learn from the servant girl so that we can say as e. e. cummings wrote:

"now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened."³

² Denise Levertov, *The Servant Girl at Emmaus* (A Painting by Velázquez) from *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov* [New York: New Directions, 2013], p1063.

³ e. e. cummings, "I thank you God for most this amazing" from *Xaipe* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1950]