

The Rhyme in the Ring of Love

Luke 24:13-35; Romans 12:9-21, The Message

Whitefish UMC

June 15, 2008

- † It seems as if I get sent to lots of meetings far away from here, doesn't it? This week was no exception, as I traveled 1000 miles round trip to attend our annual conference of all the UM churches in Montana, Wyoming, and a couple in Idaho.
- † In the past four years there have been lots of responsibilities for the wider church that have taken some of my attention and my time. Part of your gift to the wider church is to help send me to work on the "bigger picture."
- † You may not remember it, but just after returning from one meeting in Seattle, just after Easter, I talked about how dismal the future of the UM church can look, with too few pastors being raised up for the time ahead. A group of us from the western part of the church has been working on that task for the past two-and-a-half years, and it's been frustrating.
- † Conventional wisdom and words felt hollow at that point in our conversation, and despite our best efforts, and so we turned both to scripture and to poetry for guidance. How fitting, then, that we were meeting in the season of Easter, and the story from Luke's gospel of the travelers on the road to Emmaus was on our minds—several of us had to preach on it the coming Sunday!
- † You know the story well. Two people, one named, the other unnamed, walked along the road for seven miles, from Jerusalem to Emmaus, which took the better part of the day. They are deep in

conversation and in grief, for all that they had hoped for and believed in seemed to be gone. They are crushed. They are discouraged. They are confused.

- † They have given up hope, given up trying to save the world. If anything, they are running away or going home in defeat—back to the way things had always been before they met the man who said he was the Messiah. What fools they had been, they must have thought, to believe that he was the one who could change the future from one of despair to real promise and liberation.
- † And we could and can relate. Sometimes as much as we want to believe, try to believe in a hopeful future, and as hard as we work, all rational and conventional evidence tells us we're fools to think that things will be better.
- † Whether in our personal lives—especially if we are confronted with debilitating illness or misfortune or loss—or in our collective future—it seems as if the deck is often stacked against us.
- † And then something happens to remind us, as it did for those two on the road to Emmaus, that God is present and will not abandon us in our discouragement, grief, despair, and loss.
- † The trouble is, like the companions on the road to Emmaus, we can be lost in our depression and discouragement—so lost that we can't perceive the life preservers thrown to us by even familiar faces. And often that's where we find the grace that is needed to move haltingly, then confidently into the future.
- † So my colleagues and I started discussing finding the resurrected Christ in our future. When one mentioned, still depressed, the poetry of W. H. Auden, we all paid attention. Auden, writing just as Hitler's

- storm clouds and storm troopers filled the horizon of Europe in the late 1930's, composed a famous poem called, "In the Time of War."
- † My colleague in the gathering, a seminary president, intoned: "And the age ended, and the last deliverer died./In bed, grown idle and unhappy; they were safe:/the sudden shadow of a giant's enormous calf/would fall no more at dusk across the lawn outside./They slept in peace: in marshes here and there no doubt/a sterile dragon lingered to a natural death."
 - † Wow. Talk about depressing. But some of us, unwilling to be the last deliverer in Auden's poem, started comparing Auden's time to our own—and to a time long ago on a road to Emmaus.
 - † In the scriptures, Jesus joins the travelers on the road, and he asks them "What's going on? What are you talking about?" Astonished that he doesn't know, they ask him: "How could you not know what's going on—it's on everyone's mind."
 - † Sighing deeply in frustration because they don't understand, Jesus listens to them pour out their hearts about the events of the last few days. Then he talks to them about the scriptures and the fulfillment of prophecy, but they still don't recognize him.
 - † It isn't until he says he is going on as they turn off the road to their homes that they come to their senses. They invite him in for supper, and he comes. It isn't until they break bread together, celebrate the first supper together since the resurrection, that they recognize him.
 - † Then of course they ask, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us and revealed scripture to us?" Isn't it true that it's only when we look back, often, that we see how God has worked new life in us and in our world when we least expected it? Though something

was painful, God was able, somehow, to redeem it and us. And we begin to see the divine pattern for our lives—individually and collectively.

- † In our conversation around the table this spring, thinking of the road to Emmaus in the context of Auden’s image of darkening horizons, idle and unhappy slumberers, and dragons in the marshes, we awakened to God’s desire for us to reject the natural death of God’s church called United Methodist.
- † With resurrection in our hearts, Auden’s country of dragons and darkening skies became the setting for the deliverance of hope. The plans and dreams and work of the future for leaders of our jurisdiction’s church will be presented in Portland using these images of Auden’s in a way that invites not despair but courage and determination.
- † Inspired, I returned home to our church wanting to talk about the qualities of leadership we want to nurture, the programs we want to put in place, and the Spirit-led energy we want to feed.
- † So, too, did our conversations and new hopefulness lead me to learn more about the poetry and the life of W. H. Auden. Does that sound boring? Perhaps, but bear with me.
- † Wystan Hugh Auden, who later become one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, began his life immersed in the liturgies of the Anglican church. But as with many young intellectuals, he abandoned his faith for several years.
- † He is reputed to have said that sermons were unnecessary, but if he had to hear them, they should be “a) fewer, b) longer c) more theologically instructive and less exhortatory.” He added “I must

confess that in my life I have very seldom heard a sermon from which I derived any real spiritual benefit. Most of them told me that I should love God and my neighbour more than I do, but that I knew already.”

- † Yet this central Christian commandment to love God, self, and neighbour ultimately became the core of Auden’s writing and life. Though brilliant, successful, and in love with words as a way to bridge the chasm between human beings who were what he called “other than self,” Auden found himself increasingly isolated and lonely.
- † Here was a poet and writer, one of the most highly regarded of his time, a sharp commentator on politics, morals, art, and the world—friend to the greatest literary figures, theologians, and statesmen—but what he most longed for was the intimacy of love—not erotic love, but agape, as found in communion.
- † In 1933, as a young teacher in a boys school, before he became famous, Auden celebrated a mystical experience with several fellow teachers, men and women. He wrote:

*Equal with colleagues in a ring
I sit on each calm evening
Enchanted as the flowers
The opening light draws out of hiding
With all its gradual dove-like pleading,
Its logic and its powers.*

*That later we, though parted then,
May still recall theses evenings when
Fear gave his watch no look:*

*The lion griebs loped from the shade
And on our knees their muzzles laid,
And Death put down hi book.*

*Now north and south and east and west
Those I love lie down to rest;
The moon looks on them all,
The healers and the brilliant talkers
The eccentrics and the silent walkers,
The dumpy and the tall.*

- † All his life, Auden sought the sort of community where that ecstatic experience of agape love could be known. After writing the poem describing this marvelous night, Auden returned to the church. For him, worshippers formed a psychic field of a ring after the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. This ring of love evoked for him the sacrament as well as a glimpse of what heaven would offer.
- † Throughout his poems, this ring of love surfaced again and again—though not always explicitly as Christian image. Whether in commentaries about war, art, politics, or ordinary life, this ring of love often subtly emerged as the desired outcome.
- † Auden’s life was difficult at times, full of human loss and frailty. And yet Ursula Niebuhr, the wife of the famous theologian, Rheinhold Niebuhr, a dear friend, remarked that Auden saw blessing in his life when no one else could see it—so much so that it annoyed his intellectual friends.
- † How could that be? In his famous poem, “As I Walked Out One Evening,” Auden describes the hopes of romantic love, and conquest

of such love by time. But the poem concludes with an affirmation of a different kind of love:

*O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.*

*O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.”*

- † Auden found blessing in the most difficult of circumstances, even in his last years when his apartment was cold, his suit was in tatters, and he had nearly nothing left. How did he find it? In Christian community in worship, particularly in Holy Communion.
- † He points out that “Jesus never said that one should love one’s neighbor *more* than thyself, only the churches. On the contrary, at the last supper he took eating, the most elementary and solitary act of all, the primary act of self-love, the only thing that not only humans but all living creatures must do irrespective of species, sex, race, or belief, and made it the symbol of universal love.”
- † By now you may be asking yourself, “why is she telling me about this old dead poet, and what difference does it make?” This last week at annual conference, I was asked to preach at the communion service in front of hundreds of colleagues. There are better preachers than I am,

but I think I was asked to preach this year because it's my final year as chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry.

- † I'm supposed to know something about effective pastoral leadership for the now and for the future. Bishop Brown appointed me as our conference's representative to the team in the western jurisdiction charged with figuring out how to solve the urgent problem of too few effective leaders, clergy and lay, for the future. I've served on the 401 Task Force, and lots of other committees designed to figure out the future of our wider church.
- † Let me be clear: I know that effective clergy and lay leadership is the key to the future of Christ's church known as United Methodist. We need to do as the western jurisdiction team advocates and 1) figure out new skill sets of emerging models of leadership, 2) attract younger people to professional ministry, 3) adopt creative models for additional forms of ministry, 4) minimize the financial cost of seminary education, 5) develop alternative routes to congregational leadership, and 6) explore varieties of theological education that enable formation for effective ministries.
- † It's important, vital, urgent to get serious about developing these recommendations. But sometimes I think we forget that at the foundation of all those skill sets, leadership programs, and models for ministry there needs to be something Jesus never forgot or neglected.
- † And that is the ring of love that comes with God and self and neighbor completing the circle. This spring our board reflected on an article written by a farmer named Brett Olson, who serves on the Minnesota BOM and attends a tiny church on the edge of the prairie.

- † This eloquent lay member wrote: “I’ve worked with six pastors throughout my adult life as a member of a three-point charge...not exactly considered a plum appointment. It is my opinion that, of those six, about half actually did more harm than good.”
- † After reflecting on the various qualities sought after in a pastoral leader, he says, “...do you know what I want from my pastor? I want him/her to be a good person. That’s it. Genuine, caring, and concerned. Hard working and involved. I want a smile when they look at a child and warmth in their tone when they talk to the old guy who smells bad...skills that are hard to nail down in an interview.”
- † I believe that Mr. Olson, along with the old dead poet W. H. Auden, is right. All the plans and programs and strategies we can develop will do nothing positive—do more harm than good even—if they are not based on embodying the ring of love known in holy communion, in loving, forgiving community—as we love our crooked neighbour with our crooked heart.
- † How do I know? Because I’ve seen it, felt it, heard it, loved it. My husband and I were fortunate enough to travel to the Taize community this spring. We went to learn about better ways of worship and music and programs. But what we found there were unforgettable relationships with seeking Christians from all over the world. That’s what brings over 100,000 people together every winter in some stadium in Europe to sing and to pray—not the music or the program—but the relationships formed in a tiny hilltop community in a remote part of France.

- † This message of love at the center is an especially appropriate for Father’s Day. Tim Russert story. No matter how famous or important you are, how you love is what’s most important.
- † Romans passage....outdo one another not in things, success, importance, but in love...
- † So, it seems, we don’t find resurrection from a seemingly dismal future in a perfectly constructed plan for our lives or for our church, but right in front of us. Right in front of us when we practice welcoming the stranger, giving shelter to the wanderer, sharing sustenance with one another—in other words inviting them wholeheartedly into the ring of Christ’s love. That is, if we pay attention to the poetry of the Emmaus story.
- † There is rhyme in the ring of love known in the breaking of the bread. As Auden says about the meal we are about to share in symbolic rings, “The Godhead is broken like bread. We are the pieces.”
- † May we share in the breaking of the bread, creating a ring of love that invites those who are lonely, lost, comfortable, and complacent—you and me—and our crooked neighbours as our crooked selves—whoever we may be.
- † For the future of hope is again found around the table. Amen.

Sources: W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, Edward Mendelson, editor. New York, 2007.

Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, New Haven, 2005.

Brett Olson, GBHEM website, 2008.