

RESURRECTION WONDER: WORDS THAT TRANSFORM

Luke 24:13-27

April 28, 2019

Rev. Jerry Duggins

Words matter. Those of us who attended the visual art awards presentation for our Westminster Art Festival got to experience this Friday night. As Karen Bondarchuk announced the winners and shared the rationale for her choices, the art works themselves began to take on a deeper and richer meaning. She put words to our feelings. She helped us understand why we liked a particular work, how it challenged us, and what made it so powerful. She talked about the technical aspects of the composition, the artist's understanding of the theme, as well as his or her feeling about the subject.

She gave artists and art lovers a valuable lesson in art appreciation and transformed for many of us the way we look at a work of art. The next time I look at a new work of art, I'll know to look for how the artist brings together head, heart, and hands. What's the message? Does the artist's passion come through? How does the technique or composition reinforce these things? Karen's words helped us to see the art differently and more clearly. Her words mattered.

Something very similar must have been going on with the two disciples as they talked with Jesus on their way to Emmaus. When they go to reflect on that encounter, they ask themselves, "Were our hearts not burning within us... while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Somehow Jesus' words moved them. Those words were explanations of the scriptures and the prophets about how the "Messiah must suffer" and then "enter into his glory." We aren't given the actual words of Jesus, but I think we can still imagine what must have been the "head, heart, and hands" of that conversation.

The medium with which Jesus paints his picture is the scripture – what we would call the Old Testament or the Hebrew scriptures. The message concerns his death and resurrection. The details might not be evident in the scripture texts, but Jesus shows how the idea is there. This is essentially what the preacher does, arranges the scripture on the canvas to present a certain message. We do this because we believe that words matter, that they can help us to see something differently and more clearly. We can be clever or clumsy in our process. Sometimes we paint an image that comforts and sometimes one that challenges. Sometimes a sermon resonates with its audience, sometimes offends, and sometimes bores. Whatever the reaction, the sermon should convey a knowledge of the medium which is appropriate for the message. In short the sermon should interpret the Bible in a responsible way for the present audience.

The way some preachers throw around the phrase, "The Bible says..." you'd think this would be straightforward. But after four years of seminary and thirty years of preaching, I am still learning about the art of interpreting the Bible. I used to think, for example, (a long time ago) that the Bible condemned homosexuality, but today I find in the scriptures an affirmation of love without respect to gender. The differences of culture, language, and

context between the period of the Bible and today are not trivial. You can't just quote the Bible and think that the issue – any issue - is settled.

I've had people say to me that they don't come to Bible study because they're afraid of sounding stupid. I imagine people stay away from art galleries for much the same reason. Well, here's the thing. You're ceding too much power to the preacher and artist when you refuse to engage your head in understanding something of these two subjects for yourself. People from the south during the Civil War embraced slavery because they just accepted what the preacher said. People believed that AIDS was God's punishment for the sin of homosexuality because they were ignorant of the scriptures.

You don't have to become an expert, but a basic understanding of scripture is easily acquired and will greatly enhance your appreciation for sermon. But Jesus' explanation of the scriptures to the two disciples did not touch their minds alone. Their hearts were burning within them.

The message that Jesus painted for them moved them in a way that touched their whole being. He can't have just recited the events around his suffering, a mere recitation of his arrest, trials, torture, and death. He can't just have quoted some Bible verses. His portrait drawn from the scriptures must have said why it mattered, why it mattered to them.

One of the unfortunate consequences of the Reformation was that Protestants moved away from religion as a matter of the heart to a more intellectual faith. Having the right doctrine became a priority for the faith. Ritual (something that addressed the heart) was denigrated. Emotion became a thing to distrust.

We have only ourselves to blame for the growing number of people who would rather be "spiritual" than "religious." As faith moved more and more into our heads, the church evidenced less and less of the spirit. There's a strong movement in the church today to correct that. Our emphasis on caring for the earth and inclusiveness have come about largely because of our efforts to bring head and heart together. We listened to the stories of rejection by our gay brothers and sisters and saw in them the face of Jesus who suffered rejection as well. We've seen in our abuse of the earth the greed and thirst for power that led to Jesus' death. We could no longer look at his death and resurrection as some formula for our own ticket into heaven, but instead came to understand these things as evidence for God's love and desire for our lives. We are hearing with Cleopas the message and meaning of Jesus' suffering: the intent and activity of God to share in all things human, in the most difficult trials of life. We hear the promise of new life within this life. In short, we catch a glimpse of the mind and the heart of God. These are the words that Jesus shares with these two disciples, words that touched their minds and their hearts, words that mattered, words that transformed.

Head, heart, and hands. In art, the skills of the hands take an image from the head and the passion from the heart and put it on the canvas. In faith, the hands belong to you. As Teresa of Avila is well-known for saying, "Christ has no hands, but your hands." The hands represent your commitment to what your head knows and heart feels. You haven't

quite joined the faith community until you've stepped onto that road to Emmaus with Cleopas, until you've heard and felt what Jesus has to say to you. Until you are ready to use your gifts to make the good news come alive for someone else. Until you're willing to walk alongside those who suffer. Until you feed the hungry, feel their hunger, and make an effort to understand its causes.

Faith is a commitment of the whole self: heart, mind, and body, Christ's suffering was not just a doing for those who suffer, but a suffering with and a revelation to.

It began for two disciples on a road with words from Jesus, words that mattered. We ought not to be so careless or cruel with our words because they do matter. Too many broken promises and idle words has led us to disparage words in our culture. We have turned James "works with words" to "works over words." "Actions speak louder than words" has become our mantra. But for the people of Israel in the Old Testament it was always a "word from the Lord" that got them up and moving. The good news of the kingdom of God began as a word. It was the "Word that became flesh and dwelt among us." Words have always belonged to faith, words that matter.

May the words spoken to Cleopas and his companion become words spoken to us. May they excite our understanding, touch our hearts and move our hands. May they become the kind of words that matter, that transform us, words that make us whole. Amen.