

Jesus: Family Connections | Luke 24: 13-35 | LUMC | April 23, 2023

Dear Church family and friends: last week Jesus appeared unexpectedly to the frightened disciples to reassure them of His presence and support as they were dealing with mourning, grief, and loss; and as they were wondering if the Pharisees were planning to jail them or excommunicate them from society. Certainly, the disciples were between a rock and a hard place as the saying goes!

I have often found myself in the same situation, and Christ has appeared often to be on my side offering a reprieve. Yes, you too must have had the Damascus experience where the Lord showed up able to support you, to cheer you up or to literally offer new skills to calm your nerves. Jesus is the only hope for those who know Him, who pray in His name, who seek God's miracle.

Last week we encountered Jesus appearing to the disciples on the evening of the resurrection. Today, John tells us that on the same day as His resurrection Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his wife Mary¹ on their way to Emmaus, their hometown. Jesus appeared to this couple first in late afternoon, and then to the disciples later that evening, following Cleopas' report to the disciples. When the disciples heard Cleopas and his wife's testimony, they in turn confirmed that Jesus had also appeared to Simon Peter. Perhaps this appearance was the one witnessed by Mary Magdalene very early in the morning at the tomb. I do not know if Simon was taking Mary Magdalene's credit while she was in the group or because she was not in the group, and John wanted to affirm the resurrection by ascribing credibility to Simon. Or maybe Simon told them Jesus appeared specifically to him while he was alone, or maybe it was John's slip of the tongue or misinterpretation of the early morning story. Either way, Jesus was risen. He was seen by Mary Magdalene and now Cleopas and his wife, Mary. And in the late evening of that same day, Jesus appeared to the disciples.

My understanding of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection establishes him with his family of origin as informing us that He expects us to pay great attention to our family connections. During her pregnancy, Jesus' mother visited John's mother, Elisabeth (who was also pregnant), and when she arrived, Jesus in the womb leapt with joy. He related with family from the very beginning. Jesus and his cousin, John the Baptist, become partners in ministry. When John died, Jesus acquired his disciples.

During the wedding at Cana of Galilee, Jesus' mother asked him to provide wine for the guests because the host's wine was running out and many people had no wine. Jesus resisted because he had not officially started his ministry. Out of His parental respect, he offered a miraculous wine, which even today is considered the best wine ever made in such a short time.

When Jesus called his disciples, He first asked John and James, children of Salome, his mother's sister to be his disciples. John by that time was a disciple of John the Baptist. Both agreed to follow Jesus. Please also note that before Jesus took his

¹ John 19:25 may be referring to Mary, a wife of Cleopas. This Mary was also his aunt (sister to Mary mother of Jesus). So we know the importance of the family. Jesus wanted his mum to know through this Mary that he resurrected.

last breath on the cross; he asked John (the disciple he loved) to take care of his mother. John took Mary to his home after Jesus' death. Here we experience Jesus caring as the firstborns in family systems do!

When Jesus died and was buried, Mary, sister to his mother and Mary Magdalene were the first at the Tomb. They were the first to see the resurrected Jesus. And later that afternoon Jesus appeared to Mary and her husband on their way to Emmaus. Most scholars agree Mary was the wife of Cleopas and that she was a relative of Jesus' mother. Jesus wants us to pay attention to our family-of-origin members, and to include them in both our physical and spiritual lives. We also expect them to include us in their lives. Would Jesus be asking too much of us? Do we have room for this ministry? I have read American history and I feel that Jesus is reminding us of something we participated in as we grew up, and most of us continue to do. This is not something hard to comprehend. However, the doctrines of individualism have severely affected family-of-origin morals and practices.

I am aware that the concept² of individualism was first begun in France. By the late twentieth century, western theologians began debating this approach and enshrined the term³ "social individualism" into the church. They claimed that faith is an individual belief and should not be imposed upon others or spoken of in open discussion. Slowly the concept gained roots and by the end of the second world war most western families had fallen victim to it due to the effects of the war and the shortness of resources to share.

In the last few decades most westerners have fully adopted the teaching that a "God for us, and man for himself" attitude that says you are on your own, to break even or die. What followed results in fewer and fewer family connections. And guess what—this individualism concept affects the core family today. It is becoming less likely for parents to preach Christ to their children or their grandchildren. We have lost almost two generations of Christians and the church is experiencing this loss. Could it be that through Jesus' connections with his family He is challenging us to rethink new ways of doing ministry through our family of origin?

Would this challenge also force the denominations to recant and review how they have done past missions to the minorities? Today is Native American Ministries Sunday and it causes us at LUMC to pause and wonder where we lost our connection with the Natives who lived in Lynden. The first members who formed this congregation were "native, over 100 members"⁴. I am not sure how many we now have in this congregation. I will not ask anyone to raise hands in case we all get embarrassed of the action and behaviors of our past congregants who contributed to the loss of Native

² Individualism puts an individual above all else, the idea is to make the individual a primary focus: geared to her self-interest, self-freedom, and self-reliance. This makes God a puppet to be manipulated to do our bidding. Where this culture is highly promoted, it contributes to the "death" of the church.

³ Individualistic culture is more rooted in USA, Germany, Australia, South Africa, and Ireland.

⁴ LUMC centennial celebration 1884-1984

Americans among us. Today we are reviewing the Native American statement we listen to every Sunday to be more participatory!

The issue of isolationism and its effects in church mission is not a LUMC or UMC issue only. Most or all Christian denominations bear the blame! When the British Methodists and British colonialists entered Kenya and settled in my tribe; they colluded to establish boarding schools, and isolated children from their families of origin. My community resisted but failed, so missionary boarding schools sprouted at every three miles wherever a church was planted. The kids at these schools were brainwashed and told not to practice local traditions. They were admonished to not be happy to go home, and to not honor locals who practiced those traditions like local dances, norms of the society, language, and culture. This aggrieved the community, and the people made outcasts of the eleven students at one boarding school. The community perceived those kids as animals for being lost in all the ways of the tribe. When the missionary in charge of this school left station for a vacation in Britain, the community took on a mission of revenge. In the dead of the night some unknown members of the community set the boys' dorm on fire, and five of 11 boys died. To this day the killers are unknown, and the case lies in cold perhaps in colonial court books.⁵

While Jesus enjoyed family-of-origin relationships, the church he died for continues to dismantle the family-of-origin relational concept and preaches instead a divisive gospel. It's time the church needs to repent to those it has affected and continues to affect. The United Methodist Church has made daring statements of inclusion of all people despite their color or culture in the church. That is why every local congregation is encouraged to do local mission; to reconcile these past deeds and open doors to those affected.

Today we join UMC members to tell the Native Indians that they have a place in God's mission field and that LUMC's doors are open for them to experience the very love they felt when they partnered with the first evangelists and pastor of LUMC to grow this church. We would perhaps not be a congregation today if those very local people did not open their lives to this congregation! Now, we dare dream of an inclusive church!

Today Jesus is asking us to recreate fellowship in our families if it is lost, and consider the family as our first mission field. Do not go do family mission alone, but invite Christ and the Holy Spirit into this mission. Jesus will open your eyes as he did to Cleopas and Mary. We may find it worthwhile to repent to family members who we may have affected, and not to just rely on the repentance of the local church or the denomination alone.

We all have room to play, and Jesus desires our practical faith. Jesus desires that we start mission in our homes and stop worrying about the death of a church. Like Cleopas and Mary, you will realize that Jesus is in your midst. If our relationship with

⁵ The case of Meru Mission where 5 boys of the 11 boys burned to death in a dorm is recorded in a book: *When we Began there were Medicine* by Jeffrey A Fadiman, a renown Meru author from California, USA

Jesus is strong, we shall expect Him to renew our family relationships lest we struggle in vain. So, if we do our part, other causes of the declining church will also be settled! We need to make a goal for the remaining part of the year to put every effort to bring our families to experience the risen Lord of our lives.

Amen.