

A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 3, April 6, 2008, dedicated to Sadie Al-Feyez on her baptismal day, to all the new members in the March/April class, and always to the glory of God!

**“Didn’t We Feel On Fire?”
Acts 2:14, 36-41, Luke 24:13-35**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Our Gospel lesson tells us there is life in the ruins.

It’s Easter Sunday afternoon. Walking slowly and hopelessly, two followers of a great slain leader are lost in despair as they make their way through smoldering city streets of the capital city. Three days ago, their leader was brutally murdered as he stood up for all humanity - especially for the concerns of God’s poorest children.

He had come to the capital to teach, preach, and heal in a city and a nation torn asunder by hatred, greed and militarism. But, Friday his life was snuffed out as the sun was setting on all the good that he had accomplished in his short time on the earth.

As they make their way through the streets and head

out of the city, the men are approached by a stranger who asks what has been happening and why they are so forlorn. With smoke still rising, with sadness and soot hanging in the air, these two disciples of nonviolence respond, “*Are you the only one in our city who does not know what has been going on around here? On which planet do you live?*”

They continue: “*We had hoped he was the one who could rescue this nation from its roots in racial hatred and our involvement in war. We had hoped he would guide our Poor People’s Movement to a place of economic equality. We had hoped he would liberate our nation. He was our dreamer and he was a doer. But, he was cut down in cold blood, and with this death, we fear his dream and all the good deeds he has done have died with him.*”

As this scene opens, it could be Easter afternoon in the year of our Lord, 29 AD or April 6, 1968 AD. We could be talking about Jesus of Nazareth or Martin, Jr. of Atlanta. Two prophets, two preachers, two healers in their own generation ministering to two nations and a world torn in two.

Still a mystery man, our prophet, preacher and healer begins to tell them all about Moses and the prophets of old. He interprets all the writings in the Hebrew scriptures which point to the things “concerning himself.” He clears the air. He makes sense of the despair that grips them. Now, we become riveted travelers in this story while this stranger speaks of the “Jesus” story in ways seemingly never heard before.

After a seven-mile walk, the sun is setting. The men,

now clear of city streets, but still unclear of whom it is that reveals truth to them, find themselves on country roads headed for a farmhouse surrounded by the barren soil of spring planting. These men head to dinner and the warmth of a hearth that awaits them. They invite the stranger into the place of their destination. There, when he takes, blesses, breaks and shares bread with them, their eyes are opened - wide-opened - and they realize and recognize who he is! It is the Messiah! It is the Christ! With the suddenness of that recognition, he disappears from their presence.

Now hastily and hopefully, they rise and run all the way back into their city in ruins to tell the others about their “eyes wide-open” encounter with God! While they run, they ask each other, **“Didn’t we feel on fire as he talked with us and opened up the scriptures for us?”** Indeed, Christ is risen! Their teacher, their preacher, their “healing one” (which is the meaning of “Messiah”) is alive!

This past week, while teaching and preaching at Chicago Theological Seminary, this text came alive for me again. During personal prayer in the beautiful chapel at the seminary, my eyes were opened wide to see the men and women who have been my teachers, my preachers, my healers. In deep gratitude and in my mind’s eye there was Martin King, Jr. and Sr., Fred Shuttlesworth, standing right alongside: John Touchberry, Joan Forsberg, Margaret Farley, William Sloane Coffin, Jeffery Rowthorn, Henri Nouwen, James Forbes, Jr., Cornel West, Johnny Ray Youngblood, Janice Bachman, Tom Dipko and Jeremiah Wright, Jr.

You heard it right. On the Easter road of my Emmaus journey, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr., prominently stands among those who have shaped my consciousness and opened my eyes. In recent weeks, I have wondered how to speak to you about this man, whom I love and admire - my teacher, colleague and friend on the journey. In the 50-plus years of our United Church of Christ, I believe no pastor or preacher has given more time, and no church has given more money, to show that "God is Still Speaking" than Jeremiah Wright, Jr., and the people of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago!

For 40 years, Dr. Wright has inspired and then baptized nonbelievers into the fellowship and faith of Jesus Christ. He has opened the eyes of the blind to the power of Christ in this world. He has never said "No" to preaching across this denomination and this nation when called upon to do so. Moreover, he has always said "Yes" as the pastor and healing one in his congregation.

Saddened, surprised, and upset (like many of you) by the YouTube and Fox TV clips, I have found myself asking, "Does anyone realize the depth, conviction, power and love of this great man of faith?" If Jesus were "clipped" and placed on YouTube and Fox TV, you better believe they wouldn't miss a moment of his turning over tables in the temple! They would catch every fire-breathing second of his blowing up at the Pharisees and power-brokers of his time, calling them "blind fools" and "Vipers in the grass."

But let's be real. Would Fox TV and YouTube have clips of the Sermon on the Mount? I don't think so. Forget the Lord's Prayer or Matthew 25 - with the sheep and the

goats! All we would see in the 24/7 news cycle would be the angry young rebel, not the healing helper or the pastoral and prayerful presence of the Risen Savior.

Like Jeremiah Wright, I am sure Jesus would take back his temple temper tantrum for a few more moments in the seaside sun of Galilean teaching. Or would he? Wasn't he defined by his anger focused on injustice? Wasn't his creative energy the result of fire in his belly as well as glow from his head? And like both Jeremiah the Prophet of the Old Testament and Jeremiah the fiery Preacher of South Side Chicago, Jesus left hundreds of thousands more than two disciples on the first Easter evening feeling ***“on fire when he talked with us and opened up the scriptures for us!”***

I guarantee that no man or woman of faith convicted and fired up by God's Holy Spirit has failed to set on fire other men and women, youth and children around him when preaching, teaching and healing! I know I have felt the fire of the Spirit from Old Jeremiah and South Side Jeremiah. I have witnessed the transformative power of Jesus Christ at work in this world through preaching and teaching of God's anointed ones - holy and beloved - throughout my lifetime!

But our text tells us so much more about the Risen Christ. Beyond teaching and preaching, our Christ is revealed in our text in the sacramental meal as well. **Our “BREAD OF LIFE” takes . . . blesses . . . breaks . . . and gives** his bread to the disciples and ultimately to the world. This fourfold action embodies the fullness of God's love for us.

First, God comes to us and then God holds on to us in our pain and distress. Second, God touches us and blesses us in our times of need. Third, God breaks us in the midst of our suffering - and although this is the hardest part of the journey to God, it is where we deepen and grow the most. Finally, when the time is right, God gives us to others for their much-needed healing and wholeness. In this final action, new life and the power of Christ's resurrection become real through our lives laid down in His name.

After the disciples receive the bread and their eyes are wide-opened, they **REMEMBER** Jesus. It is as if he is "remembered" before their eyes. As our teens learned in South Dakota in our mission trip to Re-Member, God putting the pieces of our lives back together - God's "Remembering" - is such a crucial and sacramental element of our lives.

But there is more that this text teaches us.

You know there are three ways in which we know the events of our lives: **in a rehearsal, in the time of the event and in remembrance.** In rehearsal, our understanding is hindered by our ability to believe that the event will actually happen or that it will be so important (We are worried and wondering, "Where do I stand? What notes do I sing?"). The choir certainly knows this as this community of excellence struggles together in rehearsal with challenging notes and selections. Then, at the time of the event, our understanding is hindered by the clutter and confusion of so much so fast. Does anyone remember each

moment of their wedding or covenant service? But, in remembrance, the worry of a rehearsal and the busyness of the event itself give way to recognition, realization and understanding. In remembering, a trip, the importance of a wedding, a gathering of friends or family, or the conversation with a stranger turned into Christ at the table becomes real (drawn from the *Interpretation Commentary*, p. 287).

As we come to the table today, I invite you to open wide your eyes. See the preachers, teachers, healers of your life who have transformed you. They may be Christian, but they may also come from any spiritual part of the human experience.

Then, as you come, no matter what is broken and hurting in your life, I invite you to feel the fire burning within you. Feel the power of God's healing touch in your life. Listen for God's voice on your walk out of the ruins of your pain. And allow God to reveal Jesus Christ to you in the Scriptures, in the sacramental meal and in the remembering of your life. Amen.

