

Thin Places

Luke 24:13-35

Jennie Ott ☩ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC ☩ 6 April 2008
3rd Sunday of Easter

☩ ☩ ☩

Celtic spirituality calls them “thin places.”
Those moments in our lives
And those places in our worlds
When the eternal touches the temporal
Where God’s mystery breaks into our mundane existence.

There are physical “thin places”
Like mountaintops
Where snow-capped peaks point the way to the divine
And there are temporal “thin places”
Like at the birth of a child
When those first cries seem to well up from the deep mysteries of life

The thin places
are just that
Moments when it seems only a parchment, an onion skin, a veil
separates us from the infinite God
And sometimes, if we are lucky, we even catch a glimpse of the divine,
for a fleeting moment,
when the veil lifts and we see the holy with our own eyes.

Thin places make for thick stories in our lives.
Those A-ha moments,
when we recognize something far beyond ourselves,
when our hearts burn within us...

Those disciples along the road to Emmaus,
Seem to experience a thin place.

Luke tells us: “While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near, and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

A thin place, indeed
as this stranger came beside them and began to engage them.
As he talked,
something in them was awakened.
There was something about him, but they just couldn’t put their finger on it
And when they get to Emmaus they don’t want him to leave.

They invite him to stay the night,
and then something happens.
The thin place gets even thinner.

As they sit at the table,

Jesus then takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it,
And as he cracks that loaf, it's like the universe cracks open, too.
For a moment the veil is lifted.
The disciples recognize the face of Jesus,
And then in an instant he is gone.

The disciples are at once astonished, but then they put two and two together.
"Were not our hearts burning within us?" they say.

It was such a profound experience, this encounter with God,
that they ran back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples.
When they get there,
they find everyone is talking, too.
There are women who saw Jesus at the tomb.
Simon who saw him earlier that day.

Thin places, but their stories are thick with detail,
and they are stories that they cannot keep inside.

One of the things I love about this story, is that it is, pure and simple, church.
It is God coming near,
and it is people seeing and then proclaiming their encounters with God.

If we think about what it is we do as church, this is it.
We tell our stories,
we point one another to God,
we help each other recognize Christ in our midst,
and we proclaim God's presence to the world.

The Emmaus story is our story,
We, too, have those thin places
Where in a moment, we catch a glimpse of the divine
Where in an encounter, with a person, or a place, or a feeling,
Our hearts burn within us
And we know God is near.

As church, those are the stories we need to tell.
And as church, those are the stories we need to listen for.
It's how we know who we are,
It's how we know who God is and where God is.
It's how we remind one another that God is there,
Especially on the days when God seems far off.

Where are your thin places? In what moments have you caught a glimpse of the divine?

I'll tell you one of mine.
It happened about ten years ago, in Glacier National Park in Montana.
It started out like any other a typical day.
I was working that summer at a youth hostel,
and decided to go hiking with a few random hostellers I had met.
We found our way into the park,
started up the trailhead,

swapping stories about life.
Turns out that all four of us were engaged in ministry,
and as we walked and talked, we found uncanny similarities in our stories.
Our hearts began to burn.
The sun beat down as we climbed higher and higher,
eventually bringing us to the alpine meadow
overlooking a crystal blue lake.
We stood in silence,
Taking in the view, which was spectacular.
Pretty soon, one guy got out his blanket and began to empty his backpack in the middle of it.
Beef jerky. A pack of gum. A Snickers bar.
The next guy added trail mix and a few Tootsie Rolls.
I contributed an orange and a power bar. It all took place in silence.
Before I knew it, we were having an impromptu communion,
not with loaves and juice but with dried fruit and water.
It all went unspoken, until someone, one of them,
Broke out with "Amazing Grace."
And so we sang –
On that hillside, with our food,
four strangers brought together for a fleeting moment by a profound sense of God.
I never saw them again after that day, but to this day, I'll never forget those few hours.
It was a thin place, and but it was thick with meaning.

Thin places can be some of the most profound and transformative moments of our lives
because we recognize possibility and potential and presence in ways we never knew.
And here's the thing:
we don't need a spiritual guide to find them.
They come in all shapes and sizes –
Mountains and beaches
Around the campfire and the communion table
In solitude and in crowds
Among friends or strangers,
In moments of profound joy or sorrow,
And sometimes in the most ordinary moments of the day.

Thin places can leave us speechless,
or give us the truest voice we've ever had
They can make time stand still,
or they can break us open to the far reaches of eternity
They can happen at any moment
in any place
with any one
And sometimes we don't even know they happened until after the fact...

But they are our stories, and they are stories that need to be told
because they shape us...
they form us...
they give us a sense of who God is...
and they give us hope...
They remind us that God is still with us
And they help us point one another to God.

What better gift can we give to one another,
 Than our experiences of God's presence?
What better story can we tell,
 Then how God has acted in our life?
As church that is what we do.
 Proclaim God's presence and point the world to an encounter with God.

So rather than me waxing poetic about the Emmaus spirit,
 I am going to ask us to live it out for a few minutes,
 by sharing our stories of thin places.
In a few moments, I'm going to ask you to turn to your neighbor,
 a neighbor who like you, is on a journey, and, like you, is searching for God in all of this...
 and for the next five minutes,
 share with one another about a time you experienced a thin place.
 Share about a time when your heart burned within you.
 Share about a time when you knew God was near.
Don't worry about having the perfect example, or the right words,
 Let us just tell our stories
 because that is what we do.
 That is who we are as ministers, together, in this church.
 And we need to be reminded from time to time that God is near...to each of us.

If you are visiting with us or feel uncomfortable sharing,
 then join up with two or three people ,
 and have just some of you share your stories.

I will call us back together in five minutes,
 but take these next few minutes and listen...
 listen for how God has come near and how you have recognized God in your midst...

People share stories with one another.

Friends, these are sacred stories.
When we recognize God,
 it is a profound encounter,
 and what better place to share them than in this community that has covenanted to seek God
together.

I hope this is the start of more conversations,
 that it isn't only in these five minutes,
 but that we will share these stories with one another over coffee hour, or during the week.
We need to hear these stories from one another.
We need to be reminded that God is living and active and with us.
Let us look for those thin places in our lives,
 let us be the church,
 by telling our stories of encounter and listening for those times when God comes near.
Amen.