

Young People on the Road: Emmaus as a Model for Preaching to Young People *Part Three*

by Logan Edwards

In this final installment of this series, I hope to inspire ministers and preachers to be attentive in identifying where the Spirit is at work in their ministry to young people. Or, better yet, identify where the young people themselves are already embodying the Gospel and to proclaim that Good News to the wider community.

Throughout this series, I've been using the Emmaus story as a model, illuminated by my own ministerial experience. First, I illustrated how we can question and listen to the experiences of young people in the pews, hear their stories, and view them as true vehicles for encounter with our living God. Then, in part 2, I highlighted the importance of accompanying young people through their experiences and what it means to explore them in light of our shared faith. Now we will look at how, from these encounters, we can identify the Gospel working in our midst and boldly proclaim what we see in our preaching.

One of my favorite details of the Emmaus story is how Cleopas and his companion, upon recognizing the resurrected Jesus in the breaking of the bread, see His glorified body vanish from their sight. However, His presence remains with them when they realize they too are His body. The Eucharistic celebration enlightened them to their inherent dignity as disciples and empowered them to bring that good news to the world. This story serves as a reminder of our role in identifying and calling out these sacramental moments in our preaching as a means of inspiring others to continue their journey of discipleship.



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Part 3 - “The Lord has risen indeed”: Identification and Proclamation

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

(Luke 24:30-34)

The disciples’ eyes became open to a new reality. Upon the breaking of the bread, they came to recognize that they themselves are the Body of Christ, empowered to carry the good news of Jesus’s resurrection to the world through God’s sacramental closeness. Their response? Go back to Jerusalem to join the young Church in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Just as Christ’s accompaniment, teaching, and fellowship revealed to Cleopas and his companion

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that they had His presence among each other, in community, so too should our preaching. It is through being in community, participating in each other’s lives, and worshiping together, that we begin to see with the eyes of Cleopas. We witness Christ’s glory living in the everyday holiness of those around us. And *that* is worth proclaiming!

When asked if we should expect young people to encounter God, one minister responded,

The Lord is not absent from one moment to the next. He's in it with us. The question becomes ‘How do we view those moments and through what lens?’

As preachers of the Good News, have we trained our eyes and hearts to identify Christ's saving work in the lives of our community? Do we believe God is at work in the lives of young people today? Do we have the sacramental imagination to see God in their lives? Are we in relationship with them to the point where we can explore this with them and ask them about it? If we are, then we ought to cherish these encounters and give witness to them in our preaching; for the Word is alive and with us on our road of discipleship.

Sacrosanctum Concilium reminds us that “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows.” (§10). If this is true, then the preacher has a unique role in drawing the community's attention to the ways the Gospel has taken flesh among them. It is a summative experience when it calls to mind the fruit of the evangelical work of the local church, bringing it to conscious awareness for the community through the homily. It then becomes the source when that fruit is brought to the Eucharistic altar where it is taken and sacramentally multiplied, only to overflow and ultimately be sent again on mission.

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One priest described this beautifully when he expressed preaching as a practice of “shared contemplation.” That is, he saw preaching as a meditative exercise that arises from the experience of the community, and therefore, speaks meaningfully to them. Perhaps then, the preacher should not only spend time in relationship with the community, participating in their service initiatives and ministerial projects, but should also encourage theological reflection on those activities. In those spaces, the faith community can look back on and identify the places in their community where the Gospel has come to life. Then, when the community brings this work to the Eucharist, they draw evangelical energy from the true source: Jesus Himself.

Many of the ministers we talked with described how very few young people feel like they are a part of the Church. Instead, they view it as an institution full of rules and regulations. Are our homilies confirming this sentiment in them? Or are we illuminating to them how the Church is a living body of which they are critical and active members?

I feel one of the best ways to reimagine young people’s perception of Church is to draw their attention to the evangelical work of the people in their midst. One of our priests described how it is critical for the laity to understand their role in the sanctification of the world. He recounted how in his community, the parishioners often place him on a pedestal of holiness without recognizing their own call to such holiness. He described how they will say things like “Well, you wake up at 3 am to visit people in the hospital. I certainly couldn’t do that.” Yet, he says, they fail to recognize the holiness they exude in waking up to take care of their children or putting up with difficult bosses gracefully. This is the message he tries to communicate with them:

You have the capacity to bring all your life and offer that to God as a sacrifice. The mass is not about the priest’s thing and you're just watching it and observing it. The whole world needs to be sanctified. And I'm not going to do it. That's not my job. I can't be in your families or in your workplace, but you can. Where is the holiness happening every day? This actually matters. What you do and how you handle that coworker or that person that's troubling, annoying, or the little kids; that's going to make a difference in the holiness of the Church and how it actually engages with the world.

We can echo this truth from the pulpit by identifying the sacramentality of the everyday activities of faithful. If young people don’t feel they are a part of the Church, we must encourage them that they truly are! They must know that their daily acts of kindness and sacrifice are the work of the Church. Point to the child who showed inclusivity on the playground. Name a person in the community who showed hospitality to a stranger on the street. Call out a student who

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displayed sportsmanship at the local game. Let people know that Christ is indeed risen, in the lives of the faithful, especially the youngest. Then, it is by encouraging them to bring these small acts of holiness to the altar, that, upon the breaking of the bread, their hearts can burn within them, and they can say in faith, “the Lord is risen indeed.”

Conclusion

The Emmaus story lays out an effective pastoral framework for us to practice in our preaching and ministry. First, by courageously asking young people to share their experiences and stories with us and listening attentively, we can begin to open our hearts to their deepest longings. Then, by walking with them along their road, and exploring the presence of God with them in their lives, we come to see that the Gospel is indeed living in their hearts. Finally, by witnessing their holiness in the world and proclaiming it as Good News from the pulpit, we can inspire all the faithful in their journey of discipleship and preach what we know to be true: Christ lives and is among us!

The Word is alive! And, despite the national trends, it is especially alive in young people, even if they are yet to have the words to express it. And what better place to share this than the homily? Therefore, it is part of our role as preachers of the Gospel to foster a spirit of curiosity, accompaniment, and encounter that inspires others to see the Word is indeed. alive in their midst. In so doing, we begin to recognize the burning in our hearts so that, as a Church we can all proclaim, “The Lord is risen indeed!”