

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

by Logan Edwards

Previously, I established how the story of Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) can be a useful framework for preachers to utilize as they continue searching for ways to preach to young people today. In calling to mind my experience of ministering to college-aged students, I observed that the implicit use of such a model seemed to lend itself to effective preaching. Because of this, I figured it would be useful to more explicitly articulate an “Emmaus Model” of preaching. Therefore, in part 1, I focused especially on the process of questioning and listening. I challenged us to be asking those we minister to, “What things?” like Jesus does in the Emmaus story and to let them freely and vulnerably share their experiences with us. I hope such an explanation illustrated how we as preachers and ministers can build bridges to encounter that enable us to hear what young people’s concerns are, really, without having to “connect the dots” by ourselves.



*Logan Edwards, 24
Lay MDiv student
University of Notre Dame*

With this installation, we will look further into the Emmaus story. Jesus’s willingness to question and listen leads from an initial encounter to a deepened relationship. It is a relationship that explores the story of Cleopas and his companion in greater depth and entails accompanying them on a journey that ultimately leads to their eyes being opened. Upon their opened eyes, they then join the ranks of the disciples in the evangelization of the world! For many of the Institute’s conversation partners (all of whom are ministers, homiliticians, and/or preachers themselves), this theme of deepening relationship and accompaniment stood as a critical homiletic foundation.

Part 2: “Stay with us” — Exploration and Accompaniment

Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them.

Luke 24:25-29

At the surface, we might think Jesus’s response is condescending and minimizing of His companions’ experience. Yet, what He actually does is encourage these disciples of His to have a second look at their experience; to see it through a new lens.

Without minimizing their experience of pain and loss, He reframes their story within the lens of scripture and His messianic promise.

He reframes their story within the lens of scripture.

For us as preachers, this moment in the Emmaus story reveals a next step in our ministry of preaching to young people. After we question and listen, we ought to explore with them how God is at work in their lives and accompany them on that journey. One young priest described this as showing how “the reality of your story [is] being woven into the story of God.” For this priest, it was critical that this not be done from an “I or me” perspective but from a communal “we.” He went on to say:

It's us or we, because I'm not separate from the reality of how the word of God is seeking to be lived in the community into which I'm preaching.

For this reason, he avoids the use of “I or me” as much as possible in his preaching and starts all homiletic preparation from the presupposition that Jesus is at work in his community which participates in God’s story, here and now.

This starting point requires a deep attentiveness to place and entails integrating oneself into the community. Another priest reflected on how this echoes the spirit of the ordination liturgy, where the priest declares his presence before the bishop. He went on to reflect on what it means to declare his presence before the flock he serves. Based on this sharing, the group of priests in this conversation reflected on how many formation programs fall short in cultivating this sense of presence. They offer few opportunities to engage diverse communities while meaningfully collaborating with the laity.

He reflected on what it also means to declare his presence before the flock he serves.

One of the highlights of my ministry experience in the residence hall was being able to watch students experience the ordination journey of our rector. At the beginning of the school year, he received diaconate ordination. Then, in the spring, he was finally ordained a priest. About fifty young men were in the church that day to witness this sacrament.

A distinct part of this liturgy (that is unique to the religious community that undergirds this university), is that people who have ministered alongside the ordained in their diaconate get to present the deacon to the bishop and the whole congregation. This “presentation” is meant to give witness to the deacon’s ministerial spirit and aptitude for priestly ministry. I held the honor of writing this presentation on behalf of our rector and offering it in the liturgy while the rest of the hall staff stood behind me in support. In presenting this deacon for ordination, I was able to share how his presence and ministry had borne much fruit in our hall and how the residents embraced him as a spiritual leader, a true spiritual father. Through his accompaniment, they not only saw him as a member of the clergy, but an integral member of their dorm community. This reality became all the clearer following the ordination mass when students in attendance gathered outside for a photo with the newly ordained.

While preachers must integrate themselves into the life of the community, parishioners, too, must be willing to receive their pastors as fellow disciples. Otherwise, as one priest noted, a kind of “reverse clericalism” can arise, where parishioners struggle to see the human person behind the collar.

A kind of “reverse clericalism” can arise, where parishioners do not see the human person behind the collar.

One of the greatest gifts of my divinity program is the ability to be in class and community with seminarians. By studying, praying, and forming relationships together, seminarians learn to hear diverse perspectives (including those of women) and practice seeing God at work in the lives of the faithful. Likewise, the laity come to recognize the humanness of those who will one day serve as their pastors. Such a process of holistic human formation is critical in developing priests who are ready to encounter the living Word that is ever alive in the faithful. It cultivates a spiritual disposition that is ready to see God at work in a community and preach from such encounters.

Through accompanying and “opening the scriptures” with the downtrodden pilgrims in the Emmaus story, Jesus equips the pair to see their reality with new eyes, illumined by His glory. It is a glory so attractive that it inspires Cleopas and his companion to reach out in hospitality: “Stay with us.”

When we encounter young people in our faith communities, we will quickly find that they are indeed experiencing God in so many things—their friends and family, the activities they are involved in, nature, social justice issues—just to name a few. And if they are experiencing God in those places, to not preach on it would seem to be pastorally negligent. One priest stated that preaching after truly encountering young people is not necessarily “beautiful, theological, or clean, but it is more real.” It is a realness, an authenticity, that is detectable to young people and lets them relate to the Gospel in a meaningful way.

“Stay with us.”

True accompaniment means that we plunge ourselves into the places that young people are experiencing God. For my rector and friend, that community was our residence hall. In our ministries, like the pair on the road asking Jesus to stay with them, are we willing to follow up and ask how the school musical went, or how the “talking phase” with the person they are interested in is going? Will we go to the sporting event or young adult small group and see Christ working there? As one priest put it: “You cannot walk with someone in a generic way.” It starts with an encounter that leads to further accompaniment. This accompaniment cultivates a trust whereby we as ministers are invited into young people’s experiences and can then explore with them how their lives are united to Christ’s.

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A lay minister captured this beautifully in one of our discussions, stating, “Young people are experience rich and language poor.” We as disciples believe that the Gospel can give them language to these experiences. Therefore, when exploring young people’s experiences of the divine with them, do we “open the scriptures” with them? That is, do we have the eyes to see Jesus in their experiences, regardless of how different their lifestyle may be from ours? Will we encourage them to explore the movements of the Holy Spirit within those experiences? And finally, after exploring and accompanying them in these spaces and seeing the movements of the Spirit in the lives of our young people, will we take the risk and ask, “Can I preach on that?” Not just rhetorically but actually approaching the young person in whom we saw Christ at work and *ask* them, disciple to disciple.

By empowering young people to see their lives woven into the story of God, we invite them to echo the Emmaus disciples: “Stay with us.” And, as we walk together on the road of discipleship in a spirit of exploration and accompaniment, our eyes too are opened to Christ already present in our midst.