

Read lesson: Luke 24:13–31

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

Sixty six years ago today, thousands of American and Canadian, British and French young men waded ashore on the Normandy coast of France in the largest and most remarkable military invasion in the history of the world. Its purpose was not to exact revenge or acquire territory or riches. It was to liberate human beings from oppression.

Ten thousand died that day. Thousands more would die. Before it was over 400,000 Americans would give their lives.

The event was D Day and is remembered humbly and gratefully today.

It was a defining moment for our nation. Historians remind us that we did not enter World War II voluntarily, but reluctantly. In fact, isolationism was the strongest political dynamic. In the presidential election of 1940, both candidates, Republican Wendell Wilkie and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, promised to keep us out of Europe's war. The mood of the nation was isolationist, noninvolvement in the rest of the world, safety and security in "fortress America." You might say that the American public shut its eyes to what was happening in the rest of the world. December 7, 1941, and June 6, 1944—two dates forever permanently changed that.

The mood of the churches, denominations, theological seminaries, and university divinity schools was similar. The unspeakable horror of World War I, the slaughter of a whole generation of European young men even before we entered the war had produced a widespread revulsion for all war and a wave of isolationism in the churches, the seminaries and divinity schools.

One voice was raised to challenge the prevailing view and to suggest that faithfulness means involvement in the world, not isolation from it.

It was the strong voice of Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Niebuhr's student, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a gentle pacifist, took the last boat back to his native Germany and moved all the way from pacifism and noninvolvement to participation in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler precisely because his mind had changed and he had concluded that he could not, in faith, remain aloof and secure from the travails of his country.

Niebuhr began to write and speak about the responsibility Christian people and Christian churches have to be radically involved in the world, not withdrawn from it. He talked about the morality of involvement and intervention.

The question Niebuhr wrestled with and put to Christian people and Christian churches was this: What do we have to do with the life of the world? Can we risk getting our hands dirty? Should we risk involvement? "The question," he said, "was how to behave responsibly in an evil, morally ambiguous and compromised world." "We might as well dispense with the Christian faith entirely if it is our conviction that we can act in history only if we are guiltless," he said (Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*). The one thing Christians must not do is abandon the world, retreat from the world.

The temptation has always been to do just that. When things get rough in the world, or dirty, or dangerous, or morally ambiguous, the temptation is to withdraw, to flee for safety to the monastery, the church—our fortress—or to withdraw intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually from the world and to practice our faith privately, internally—to grow our "spirituality" and to mean by that a sacred space in our lives, untouched, unsoiled, unaffected by the life of the world.

Jürgen Moltmann is a German theologian now approaching the end of his career. He and his wife, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, have written a book together, *Passion for God*. Moltmann served in the German army, where he narrowly escaped death as a seventeen-year-old soldier and spent three years in a POW camp, where he became a Christian. In 1948, he and his wife began theological study, and Moltmann began a lifelong quest: Where is God in this sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, sometimes noble, and sometimes ghastly world of ours?

And his answer, forged at the foot of the cross, was and is "right here": God is here, right in the middle of this world, not some other place.

And here, right in the middle of this world, is where God's people must be.

One of his chapters in the book is entitled, delightfully, "Praying with Open Eyes." In it Moltmann playfully observes that the conventional body language of prayer is distinctly otherworldly. He writes:

People who pray no longer belong properly to the world at all. They already have one foot in the world beyond. . . . We close our eyes and look into ourselves, so to speak. We fold our hands. We kneel down and lower our eyes—even cast ourselves down with faces on the ground. Why do we shut our eyes? Don't we need much more prayer with open eyes and raised heads? (pp. 57–58)

Moltmann suggests that the conventional posture of prayer—eyes closed, head lowered, hands folded—is a metaphor for the practice of Christian faith.

The earliest Christians prayed standing up, looking up, with outstretched arms and eyes wide-open, as if they were expecting something or someone.

To have faith is to have your eyes open. It is to be awake and alive to the world. To have faith is to embrace and live thoroughly in the world God made and has given to us, the world God loves so much, the world God's own Son loved and for which he died.

To have Christian faith is to live like he did, which is to say, thoroughly in the world: to love the world deeply, to love its beauty, the soft air of a June morning, the dramatic power of a lightning storm over the lake. To have faith is to love being part of this world: to rejoice in its colors and sounds and tastes and sensations. To have Christian faith is to be awake and alive to others: to our dearest ones, our families and friends. It is to be open and vulnerable, to feel and experience the suffering of others as Jesus did: never to isolate and avoid and retreat but to live in and with and among the precious others with whom we share this earth, this city, this community for a few decades of time.

That is what Jesus taught two of his disciples one day. They were walking along an ordinary, dusty road to the little village of Emmaus. As a matter of fact, they were walking to get away from the ambiguity and disappointment and tragedy of life.

Their friend and Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, had been cruelly executed. The world had been the world in all its unfeeling cruelty and harshness, snuffing out his life in an instant, like blowing out a candle. So they hid, locked the door, pulled back as far as they could, and two of them said, “Let’s go for a walk.”

Along the road, a dusty road leading away from life’s ambiguity and tragedy, leading nowhere in particular, Jesus came to them, and walked with them and talked to them, and when he broke the bread and gave it to them, their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

We have to live with our eyes wide open and our hearts, our arms and our hands outstretched. God calls us to live thoroughly in this world, to never withdraw or retreat from the world even at its most risky and ambiguous. I love something William Sloane Coffin said about the church:

Most Church boats don’t like to be rocked: they prefer to lie at anchor rather than go places on stormy seas. But that’s because we Christians view the Church as the object of our love instead of the subject and instrument of God’s. Faith cannot be passive: it has to go forth—to assault the conscience, to excite the imagination. (Credo, pp. 140–141)

And so we go forth in the days ahead, as a congregation of God’s people to live as thoroughly and as faithfully as we know how in this world, in the promise that God loves the world and wants us to be in it in his Son’s name.

“ In the breaking of bread their eyes were opened and they recognized him,” the Bible says. In the common, ordinary, everyday life of this world, the friendships, the encounters, the shared tasks and shared meals, the laughter, the joy, the worry and pain and grief—in all of it he promises to meet us.

One of my favorite few sentences are these by Frederick Buechner:

Sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only . . . a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our being and imagination . . . what we may see is Jesus himself... (walking with us).

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

From Jurgen Moltmann:

In prayer we wake up to the world as it is spread out before God in all its heights and depths. We perceive the sighing of our fellow creatures and hear the cries of the created beings that have fallen dumb. We hear the song of praise of the blossoming spring and chime in with it. We feel the divine love for life that allows pain to touch us to the quick and kindles joy. Real prayer to God awakens all our senses and alerts our minds and spirits. The person who prays lives more attentively.

Amen!

Passion for God