

## "Talking About Himself"

Rev. Peter Bynum

April 30, 2017

<sup>13</sup>Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup>While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup>Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" <sup>19</sup>He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup>But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. <sup>24</sup>Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." <sup>25</sup>Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup>Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

<sup>28</sup>As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>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?"

<sup>33</sup>That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup>They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" <sup>35</sup>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 24:13-35)

Three boys were talking recently in a schoolyard. Each was proud of his father and wanted to share that pride with his friends. The first boy says, "My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, then calls it a poem, and they give him \$50."

The second boy says, "That's nothing. My Dad scribbles some notes on a piece of paper, and he calls it a song, and they give him \$100."

The third boy says, "I got you both beat. My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, and he calls it a sermon. And it takes eight people to collect all the money!"

From an early age, we start learning to talk about ourselves. We learn quickly that talking about our families is pretty much the same as talking about ourselves, and we discover that, when we have good news about us or our family, it is fun to share it. But we also learn, pretty early on, that there is a fine line between sharing good news and bragging. Through personal experience both as story tellers and story hearers, we begin to understand that there are ways to share that are acceptable and ways to share that are, well, annoying. When it comes to "tooting our own horn," some of us become very accomplished musicians, even if the music we make is not much fun to listen to.

Why do we do this? Because all of us do, at least a little bit. A Harvard University study back in 2012 scanned brain images of people who were given the opportunity either get paid to respond to questions about other people, or forego the money and respond to questions about themselves. Many chose to leave the money on the table and talk about themselves. The scans also proved that sharing information about ourselves is just as satisfying to us as a really good meal or even physical intimacy. In other words, talking about ourselves feels good.<sup>1</sup> Psychologists have also found that, when our sharing slips over the line into the annoying range, it is often because we are seeking some external positive affirmation, trying to compensate somehow for feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem.

With this background, it is fascinating to watch Jesus in action on the road to Emmaus, right on the outskirts of Jerusalem. We have to remember that it is still Easter Sunday. As the sun begins to set on the road, Jesus is nearing the end of a pretty big day: rising from the grave... fulfilling the scriptures... claiming victory over sin and death... busting the door into heaven wide open... and reuniting with his disciples as a conquering hero. He had lots of good stuff to share if he were so inclined. Interestingly, the two men that encounter Jesus on the road are not able to recognize him. With great irony, they share the story of Jesus with Jesus himself. The door could not have been opened wider for Jesus to talk about himself. Which is exactly what he does.

The issue is that we do not know exactly what he said about himself. Without giving any detail, the text merely says that "*beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*" A colleague of mine once said that, if she could ask just one question about the Bible, it would be to ask what Jesus said to these two guys walking down that road. Just think about how many hours, how many words, how many sermons and lessons have been devoted over the centuries to interpreting who Jesus was? And here, on this road, Jesus himself is giving the answers! It's Jesus explaining Jesus -- how the Old Testament applies to him... what the prophets hoped for in him... how he has fulfilled it all in the flesh. All of these answers are coming right from the mouth of the teacher himself, the Savior himself, the Lord himself. My friend is absolutely right: wouldn't we **love** to know how Jesus talked about himself?

One thing we can conclude about how Jesus talked about himself is that he never came right out and said who he was. As we've already said, the door was wide open for Jesus to talk about himself, because the men were already talking about his story. How easy it would have been for Jesus to say, "You do know who I am, right? You know that guy who rode into Jerusalem on the donkey last Sunday... you know the one that everyone was cheering for and celebrating? Yeah, **that was me**. You know that story you just told me about the guy being raised from the tomb? **That was me**. You know all the things the prophets said about the Messiah coming to save Israel? Yeah, **that was me**."

While we don't know exactly what he said, we can be pretty certain he didn't say anything like this, because his identity remains a mystery to these men. They don't figure that this is Jesus until much later, when they all sit down to dinner. All that time on the road, while Jesus was talking about himself, he never made himself out to be the hero. He never claimed any special status for himself. He never sought affirmation or adulation. He never even identified himself as the object of their conversation. All that time, as he was talking about himself, he never really talked about himself.

---

<sup>1</sup> Susan Newman, "Why Some People Can't Stop Bragging," <https://www.psychologytoday.com>, on Apr. 25, 2017.

Dr. James Pennebaker, a psychologist at the University of Texas, has given most of his career to the study of the words people use. Interestingly, he has found that those who frequently use the first person pronoun "I" actually tend to be less secure and confident than those who do not. In fact, Pennebaker's studies confirm that people who most frequently use the pronoun "I" "subconsciously believe they are subordinate to the person to whom they are talking." In recent studies of work projects completed through email or online interaction, his team showed that the people who used "I" the least were actually most likely to be perceived as leaders. In other words, every time someone said "I would do it this way," the respect that person received from peers actually went down.<sup>2</sup>

My guess is that Jesus, as he was walking down the road, did not use the word "I" very much. This is why it took those guys so long to figure out who he was. This is why it was only clear to them in hindsight, when they thought back on the day and said to each other, "*How did we miss it? Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*"

So, what can we learn about Jesus through the ways that he talked about himself – or did not talk about himself -- on the road to Emmaus? The first is that, on that day and every day, it is never really about him. With Jesus, it is rarely about the "I." It is about the "us," the "we" the "you" and the "me." This past week, Pope Francis gave a TED Talk, which is cool in itself, but in that talk he made this exact point. More specifically, the Pope said (and these are his words) that we need to be reminded "that we all need each other, [that] none of us is an island, an autonomous and independent "I," separated from the other, [that] we can only build the future by standing together, including everyone."<sup>3</sup> This is the kind of future Jesus was building, and that is why Jesus didn't spend his precious Easter time with these two men talking in terms of "I." He didn't boast or brag, even in the glow of the Easter victory, because it was never about him. It was about a new life -- a new future -- that is forged not in isolation, but in community.

The second thing we learn about Jesus in this passage is that he neither forces himself on us nor demands an instantaneous commitment of faith from us. When they near the place where the two men planned to stop, Jesus actually walked ahead. He did not linger to fish around for an invitation to dinner. With the courtesy of a great guest and the graciousness of a great host, Jesus wishes to make it easy on the men if they are ready to say goodbye. He places no pressure on them to do the right thing and invite him inside. Through his actions, Jesus shows that faith is something that happens within the everyday contours of life: on the road, around the table, in conversation and exchange. Discovering Jesus is not something that happens in one moment of decision. It is a journey to be walked, a presence to be encountered. It is not a doctrine to be memorized and recited, but a person to meet and get to know. At no point does Jesus say, "Here I am. Now, believe!" Instead, he graciously gives the men space to work through their thoughts and emotions on the road, hashing things out in their own time as Jesus walks by their side.

Finally, a third thing we learn from Jesus through the ways that he talked about himself is that he does his most powerful talking without words. Mary and Martha knew he loved them not only because he said so, but because he wept as they wept and grieved for his brother Lazarus as they grieved for their brother Lazarus. Countless lepers and crippled people knew that Jesus had the power to heal not because he said so, but because he placed his hands upon

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Danny Rubin in "What Bragging on Facebook Says About Us," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/danny-rubin/facebook-bragging\\_b\\_4123486.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/danny-rubin/facebook-bragging_b_4123486.html)

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, "Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone," <https://www.ted.com>.

them to set them free. The world knew that Jesus would claim victory over and death not because he said so, but because he endured a cross so that the light would always shine, even in the darkness. And the men on the Emmaus Road knew that Jesus was the one who had risen from the dead not because he said "Yeah, that was me," but because they were there when his hands broke bread at their table.

Some have surmised that these men may actually have been present when Jesus took five loaves and two fish and fed 5,000 on a hillside in Galilee -- that in the moment when the hands of Jesus took hold of the bread and broke it again they finally remembered, that when they remembered they finally saw, and when they saw, they finally believed.<sup>4</sup> Maybe that was true; maybe it was not. What we do know is that two men met the risen Christ as one who speaks not of himself, but of others... as one who refuses to force himself upon anyone, but is content to simply walk beside us in faith and truth... as one who makes himself known not just with lofty words, but with a love that gently but resolutely bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. We, too, are invited to join him on the road, to meet him there, and hear him talk about himself in ways that the entire world can understand.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> William Barclay. *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press (1975), p. 295.