



WEEK 5: RECOGNISING JESUS

Several years ago, our family visited my brother and his family in Canada. They live on the outskirts of Toronto, in what used to be a small town that has now been virtually swallowed up into the growing metropolis.

Like many small towns surrounding large cities, their municipality is now nearly unrecognizable from what it was fifty years ago. Strip shopping, garish neon signs, miles of roads, and extensive new subdivisions dominate the once quiet village.

David and Kim, though, are fortunate to live in a house in the original part of town, which retains its old character, just two blocks off Main Street. At the front of their century-old villa is a veranda. It fits the character of the surrounding houses, most of which have similar spaces.

In the intense, humid heat of a Southern Ontario summer, it became our habit to sit out on the veranda first thing in the morning and after dinner (supper). In the evenings, neighbors would often walk by – sometimes with a dog in tow – and it was natural and easy to engage in chit-chat with them. I quickly grew to enjoy the relaxed times sitting on the veranda, watching the world go by, sipping coffee, reading the paper, and engaging in chatter with both family members and passers-by.

All this got me thinking: why was it that houses of this vintage had front verandas but more recently designed homes ignored such spaces, often instead choosing to build a double garage (with an automatic door) on the front of the house facing the street?

The contrast between these two radically different uses of front yard space says a great deal about our changing priorities for the way we do life. It's not that outdoor living spaces have been dismissed. It's just that these important areas are now almost always built in the *back* yard – deliberately positioned in order to maximize privacy and be as far away from prying eyes as possible.

The most visible, neighbor-connected space in our properties is now dominated by the car. And the preference of many people is to gain access to their homes or places of work without having to step outside either the private bubble of their vehicle. Little wonder then, that many people haven't even talked with some neighbors in their street or their office, even though they've lived there or worked with them for several years.

In contrast, I think what I like so much about the front veranda is the connection it gives with the neighborhood. It acts as a kind of bridge between the more private space of the house and the public space of the street. It allows people to engage with those who live close by in an open, hospitable way.

Our move to much more secluded outdoor living space in our houses is symptomatic of the rapid move to seeing home as a private retreat from “the world”.

I admit that left to my own devices I would opt for a secluded, tidy and well-ordered life. Fortunately God – and my wife (in case you’re wondering, they *are* distinct entities) – have conspired to spoil me for such a tame, safe, and cloistered existence. First there were young adults living with us. Then came our children. Following hard on the heels of our own little balls of messiness were foster children. Then, when I’d finally negotiated the child-rearing years, any thought I might have had that our home was about to enter the peaceful bliss of emptiness was shattered. That’s when we invited other adults to move in with us.

What happened to my dream of a predictable, peaceful and regulated home life? I wish I could say that my vain yearnings for such tranquility have vanished. Alas, they still echo in my ears from time to time – mainly when things are too intense and challenging and I just want to run away from it all.

The cultural dreams we find planted and watered in our imagination are difficult to uproot and replace. I am living proof of this. In my best moments I revel in the truth that our home life is far more deeply enriched by experiencing the life and energy of others in our midst.

Our attempts to maximize our privacy and live as discrete individuals, inevitably lead us to make our homes into retreats – refuges or havens from life. It’s easy to give in to the cultural pressure to separate off our more public roles from our private life. Often I hear Christians say, “My job is so intense that I need my home life to be a haven – completely free of any expectation to relate to or serve others.” Home is viewed almost entirely as a sanctuary, a place to extract oneself from work and community life.

Homes *should* be a place of safety, rest, and nurture. There is a time to close the front door and just rejuvenate as a family or individual. Jesus took regular time out to be by himself and also had times where it was just he and his core disciples. These were important times of replenishment and re-focus. ——— —

However, the rhythm of rest was in order to re-engage. What’s more, there were occasions when he allowed his solitude to be interrupted by the needs pressing in upon him. In fact, several of his most significant times of ministry appear to have been unscheduled interruptions.

Rather than treating our homes primarily as retreats, we would be better *also* viewing them as springboards to community and mission. Perhaps rather than treating the whole of our home as largely “off-limits” to others, we might do better to understand certain spaces in the house as useful for retreat – and other spaces for hospitality. This would give room for a more integrated understanding and use – one where our homes contain opportunities for both retreat *and* hospitality. A haven *as well as* a springboard to mission.

Discuss

- Share something that impacted you from this reflection.
- How do you view your own home? Is it primarily as a retreat or a place of hospitality?
- Thinking about your work context, what might this reflection suggest regarding the various physical spaces involved in your office, factory, school, hospital, practice rooms, restaurant/café, or retail shop?
- Share how things went for you in your Challenge of the Week.

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- Physical space is very important to venues for hospitality. Think about the space/s you work in. In what ways do they assist or work against your objective of guests feeling welcome and healthy interaction taking place? What would/could you do to improve the space?

Luke 24:13-35 The Road to Emmaus

Read the passage through twice, pausing after each reading for silent reflection.

Setting the scene

It was an expectation in the ancient world that a traveller be offered lodging and food – particularly the later in the day it was. Roads were dangerous at night and protection was part of the obligation to be hospitable. It was also polite for the traveller to not ask for such hospitality. However, it was unusual for the guest to take the initiative in breaking the bread and giving thanks for it. That was the role of the host.

Reflection

Here are four brief excerpts from the passage. Choose one or two and spend some time meditating on them, imagining you were part of the story. As you do this, try to listen to what God might be saying to you. If you are in a group, finish by briefly sharing your thoughts.

“They stopped short, sadness written across their faces.”

“Jesus acted as if he were going on, but they begged him, ‘Stay the night with us, since it is getting late.’ As they sat down to eat, [Jesus] took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them.”

“Suddenly their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”

“Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?”

Discuss

- Why do you think the two followers were kept from recognizing Jesus?
- What “changed” for Cleopas and the other follower?
- If you can, share a time when God spoke to you (or made himself known to you) in a way that changed you or brought clarity.

Where do we recognize Jesus?

Luke is careful to note it was in the breaking of bread that the two followers finally recognized who they had welcomed in. Jesus comes to Cleopas and the other follower as a stranger. It’s only during the meal that they comprehend who they are hosting.

It brings to mind the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25). When the king says to the “righteous ones”, *“For I was hungry, and you fed me...I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home...”* they expressed surprise – *“Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you?... Or a stranger and show you hospitality?...”*

The answer from the king has reverberated down through the history of the church. And it was taken particularly seriously – even literally – by the Christians of the early centuries: *“Whenever you did this to the least of these, you did it to me”*. This was the mandate for believing that when they gave generous hospitality to those on the margins, it was as if they were entertaining Jesus.

So, where do we recognize Jesus? According to the parable, it is in the face of those we offer hospitality to.

Discuss

- In what way might it change our approach to hospitality in the workplace if we understood we were in fact serving Jesus?

Home and work-based hospitality

It’s intriguing to note how many of the incidents recorded in the gospels occur within a home or workplace environment. In fact, it seems fitting that this incident in Emmaus is the first recorded meal after the resurrection.

Even though Jesus had no regular home himself, he was often invited to eat or sleep at someone’s place. And on more than one occasion, he actually took the initiative and invited himself to a person’s home!

The Emmaus story – and others like it – hints of much less differentiation between home, work, and wider community life. Of course, we see this in evidence everywhere through the New Testament. Most church gatherings were held in homes. And most workplaces were closely linked to the home. Some historians like Michael Green, even suggest that it was this more open use of the home that was a key to the gospel spreading like wildfire across the Empire. Home-based hospitality enabled both community and mission to thrive.

A place to welcome others is a central biblical reason for the home and workplace. Of course, it’s not the only place we can express hospitality, nor is the welcoming of others the only purpose for a place of work or a home. Nevertheless, we may need to be reminded that the home – and the workplace – are not ends in themselves.

So those of us who follow Jesus have to think carefully how we can open up our homes and workplaces to be hospitable.

Discuss

- Why is it that we are often so fiercely protective about of own “space” at home or work?
- If you were to make your home or workplace more hospitable, what might need to change?

Prayer

A time of open prayer, inviting Jesus to lead and show himself more clearly to us.

Challenge for the week!

There’s two parts to your challenge for this week:

Firstly, spend some time prayerfully considering how you could use your workplace more intentionally to be a place of welcome for others. Particularly focus on what might be a manageable starting point. Ask God to inspire you to plan a first/next step. (Note that even if you are not the boss or manager of your workplace, you still have much influence in helping it to be a place of hospitality.)

It is the guests who are the measure of a home. When guests are fully welcome, they share the home.” David Matzko McCarthy

Secondly, give some concerted thought to planning a meal with a “stranger” or “strangers” sometime soon – a new colleague, a marginalized or undervalued workmate, a customer or client who you sense is struggling. You may like to do this with some or all of the others in your group. Who could you invite? What might make it easier for them to accept your invitation? What would be good to do to make the time welcoming and enjoyable for your guests? Make a plan and ask God to help you put it into action.

A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

Les Misérables (2012) 158 minutes

Summary: Victor Hugo's masterful novel *Les Misérables* has been made into several movies, as well as one of the great musicals of all time. This most recent of film productions is a combination of both. The redemptive tale is set in the harsh struggle of early nineteenth century France. It centres around Jean Valjean, a man who has spent nineteen years in hard labour for stealing a loaf of bread. Released on parole, Valjean quickly discovers the hopeless life a released convict faces – where no one will house or employ him. He is an outcast. And then, a remarkable act of hospitality changes everything...



- In what ways is the Bishop of Digne's welcome of Jean Valjean transformational for the parolee?
- The story is full of acts of hospitality and inhospitality. Discuss some of these and what struck you most about them.
- Inspector Javert sincerely believes he is doing God's will by enforcing justice. However, he unwittingly is deeply inhospitable – with no room for grace and compassion. Those of us who are committed to Christianity can also often come across as unwelcoming and harsh. Why do you think this is the case? Is there anything we can do to change this?
- An integral part of welcoming others is knowing when to also let them go. Valjean faces this with Cosette. What do you think gives him the grace to do so? And what challenges does he have in letting go?
- In the end, what is it that renders Javert unable to reconcile the actions of Valjean?

Read Luke 24:13-35 (The Road to Emmaus). Take a moment to reflect on each of the following parts of the story.

“They stopped short, sadness written across their faces.”

“Jesus acted as if he were going on, but they begged him, ‘Stay the night with us, since it is getting late.’ As they sat down to eat, [Jesus] took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them.”

“Suddenly their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”

“Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?”