

Divine Companion

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Luke 24:13-35

Henry Van Dyke was a well-known Presbyterian minister from the turn of the last century. He published widely, drew large crowds and even served as the Ambassador to Luxembourg during the Woodrow Wilson administration, which sounds like a pretty sweet gig. You might know Van Dyke's Christmas short story, *The Other Wise Man*. You will surely know his most famous hymn, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," set to Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."

Another Van Dyke work worth knowing, one of my favorite hymns, is called "Jesus, Our Divine Companion," written in 1909. It can be set to many tunes; my favorite setting, the one in our hymnal, is to an early American tune called "Pleading Savior."

"Jesus, our divine companion,/ By your lowly human birth/ You have come to join the workers,/ Burden bearers of the Earth./ You the carpenter of Nazareth,/ Toiling for your daily food,/ By your patience and your courage,/ You have taught us work is good.

Where the many toil together,/ There you are amongst your own;/ Where the solitary labor,/ You are there with them alone./ You, the peace that passes knowledge/ Dwelling in the the daily strife;/ You the bread of Heaven broken/ In the sacrament of life."

If we are back in the sanctuary on Labor Day, perhaps we will sing this hymn, written as it was in the midst of the American Industrial Revolution, where business was booming and working conditions were often difficult.

I've thought of this hymn often in this coronavirus pandemic, and I've thought of it this morning. Van Dyke writes about the workers, the "burden bearers," people

toiling for their daily food, sometimes together, sometimes in solitude. Miners. Assembly line workers. Manual laborers. Rail workers. Meat packers. Farm workers. One of my predecessors in Rochester – at the time this hymn was written – would preach in a beautiful sanctuary on a Sunday morning and then in the union halls in the evening.

Who would Van Dyke’s “burden bearers” be now – truckers, Acme and Giant shelf stockers, Grub Hub delivery guys, line cooks, sanitation workers – who toil on the front lines to bring us food and essential goods, whose jobs are at higher risk than many, becoming infected and dying at greater rates than many of us.

I’ve also thought of this hymn because of that word – “companion” – and what it means. We’ve used it euphemistically – they married their “longtime companion.” Or in a Paul Simon song – “my traveling companion is nine years old, he is the child of my first marriage...”

The word “companion” comes from “*panis*,” the Latin word for bread, literally “bread with.” I love that. Originally, the word was used to describe someone with whom you share a meal.

So Jesus, per Henry Van Dyke, is our “divine companion,” one who both joins the workers of the earth in their labor – whether in 1909 or 2020, and who breaks bread with...with them, with us, wherever bread is needed, bread for our bellies and bread for our souls and bread for our broken and fearful world.

That matters now, as we continue to face this pandemic, as uncertainty mounts, as statistics clarify and obfuscate, as death and grief escalate, as the economy strains, as hunger persists, as tension mounts, as boredom increases, as we increasingly yearn for some kind of return even though we don’t know when that will be or even what it will look like, and even as that yearning causes new waves of anxiety.

How do we claim Jesus as our divine companion, the one who travels with us, journeys with us, even breaks bread with us?

How do we claim Jesus as our divine companion this morning, as the gospel story we just heard mirrors so very poignantly the moment in which we find ourselves? It is another dramatic post-Easter appearance story with characters and plot development and high drama. In Luke’s gospel it is still that same day, the first

Easter. The disciples have already begun to disperse. Two are walking to the village of Emmaus, outside of Jerusalem. A stranger approaches them; we do not know if they were six feet apart! We know it is Jesus; they do not. “What’s up,” Jesus essentially says. The disciples are incredulous. How can you not know? And they tell him everything that has happened, including their dashed hopes that Jesus would have been a different kind of Messiah and their skepticism at the story of the empty tomb told to them by the women. Jesus proceeds to interpret to them the entire sweep of the biblical story, Moses onward. Still they do not comprehend. End of scene 1.

Scene 2: They come to the village and he fixes to continue on. “Stay,” they say. He stays. At dinner, at table, he breaks bread and gives it to them, and, we are told, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” He vanishes. They return quickly to Jerusalem and tell the others what they experienced, skeptics no more. Jesus the traveling companion becomes Jesus the table companion, breaking bread, sharing bread, becoming recognizable as they gather around the table, empowering them to tell his story as he shares his broken body with them, becoming known to them in the breaking of bread.

How is Jesus known now in the breaking of bread? How do we recognize him? Can the world recognize him through us? How do we claim and live the companionship of Jesus? How are we companions with others now – strangers and friends, in the flesh and in the world of Zoom and Facebook and Facetime?

We remain travelers in the Easter season, where the risen Christ continues to appear, not once then, but continually, and often where most needed.

So I can imagine, with hope and trust, the risen Christ, the divine companion, appearing in hospitals, with doctors and nurses and techs and researchers as they perform their risky, vital work.

And that same divine companion is with those receiving treatment, some who will improve and some who will not, some who will die absent their loved ones by their sides. The divine companion is there, walking alongside those who wait and those who grieve.

The divine companion appears in homes of all kinds – the homes of the lonely and isolated whose situation is only magnified in this crisis. The homes of families with

parents seeking to work and teach and hold kith and kin together, sandwich generation families caring for kids and concerned about aging parents.

The homes of those who leave to work each day, all those laborers and burden bearers.

The divine companion appears at tables of all kinds, where every meal becomes sacramental and eucharistic. Meals eaten in loneliness. Meals picked up at a restaurant curbside, contactless, to support a favorite restaurant. Family meals. Meals that anticipate other meals, where bread is broken in new and powerful ways.

Author Frederick Buechner wrote: "I believe that although the two disciples did not recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus recognized them, that he saw them as if they were the only two people in the world. And I believe that the reason why the resurrection is more than just an extraordinary event that took place some two thousand years ago and then was over and done with is that, even as I speak these words and you listen to them, he also sees each of us like that."

"He sees each of us like that." I believe that Jesus recognizes us long before we recognize him, that his appearance is not contingent on our recognition.

And one thing more. There are times – and this is the moral and ethical mandate of this pandemic – there are times we are surrogates for him. Someone said this week that this pandemic has not revealed new things, but only cast with greater clarity what was already present, including deep iniquities in our culture and society. We who are privileged, who have access to technology, who can secure food, who can maintain distance without complication, have a role in this drama, not only to be the disciples to whom Jesus appears, but to be the body of Christ made recognizable to others when bread is broken – spiritual bread, physical bread, economic bread.

The fourteenth century mystic Theresa of Avila reminded us that "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

After Jesus vanishes, the disciples claim their hearts were burning as he was traveling with them. May that be so with us.

But more than that, they got up – after being fed by their divine companion – and engaged the world in service. Our calling is no different.

Henry Van Dyke concluded his hymn with this affirmation about Jesus: “You the bread of heaven are broken in the sacrament of life.” It is our calling to receive that bread, to be fed, and having been fed, to share that bread with a world hungry for good news, for hope, for healing, for such a time as this and for every time. Amen.