

McCabe United Methodist Church

Footprints Series, Part 1

“The Journey”

Sermon on Luke 24:13-35 (April 29 & 30, 2017)

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Do you know what a Friendship Bench is? You can see them on the playgrounds at elementary schools all over town. A Friendship Bench is a big, colorful, two-person bench that's meant to be left open for a child who may be feeling lonely or who is having a rough day.

Perhaps that child doesn't know how to ask for a friend to sit with them, so they go sit in the Friendship Bench as a signal that they don't want to be alone. Other children are to be on the lookout for anyone sitting by themselves in the Friendship Bench: if someone is there, a “friend” can join them – offering comfort or simple kindness in that moment.

I had seen Friendship Benches around town, but I didn't know their full purpose until about a month ago.

See, for a month or so, here at the church, we've been regularly receiving promotional emails from a faith-based, non-profit organization in North Carolina called “People of the Second Chance.” Through small group study and devotional materials, this organization seeks to help pull people out of painful life cycles like shame, addictions, bitterness, etc.

The promotional emails we've been getting begin with a devotional-type article and a couple of the emails that have come in have struck a particular chord with me; one of them included the question *“What if the pews and chairs in our churches were like Friendship Benches?”*

“What if the pews and chairs in our churches were like Friendship Benches?”

Now, stick a metaphorical pin in that question while I tell you about one of the other emailed devotional articles we got from this organization. It went like this:

“Imagine for a moment that the 'Story of Your Life' is lined up on a shelf as though it was captured in those large, old-school encyclopedia collections. You know, the ones that door-to-door salesmen sold for extraordinary amounts of money back in the day.

“Each individual book holds a year of your life, starting with age 1. One book for each year. There are some years of your life you would happily relive over and over because of how precious, amazing, or good it felt. There were big highs and positive emotions.

“Then, there are others you might like to forget. The ones filled with hurt, mistakes, wrongs, darkness, and loss. Perhaps you are tempted to take the unfavorable books -- those years of hardship, those reminders of pain – [perhaps you are tempted to take the painful books] off the shelf and stuff them away deep in [your] catch-all hall closet.

“But if we are actively trying to live in the full grace of God, we begin to learn how to accept all of it ... even the books we don't like... We don't focus on fixing ... we focus on embracing... We create space for other people's lives.”¹

“What if the pews and chairs in our churches were like Friendship Benches?”

What if we truly understood our pews and our chairs to be places where each of us is welcomed, in the totality of our stories – with the good, the bad, the ugly... the chapters of our life story we love and our proud of, mixed together with the chapters we'd prefer to put in the junk drawer – what if we truly understood our pews and chairs to be like Friendship Benches?

What if we came here to church, to worship, on the lookout for folks whose life stories may not be going the way they'd like them to be going?

What if we were on the lookout for those folks – knowing *we ourselves* are very often the ones who are struggling – what if we were on the lookout for folks needing a friend... and what if we simply sat with them?

¹ From emails connected to People of the Second Chance. <http://www.secondchance.org/>

What if we understood ourselves to be people who are called to join people on life's journey... no matter what's happening in that journey – even if that journey is currently fraught with grief or a loss of hope?

I couldn't help but think about all this as I thought through today's reading from chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke.

And I couldn't help thinking about it because, if anything, this story is exactly about grief... it's exactly about loss of hope... and, most importantly, this story from Luke chapter 24 is about how the road to the town of Emmaus became a “Friendship Bench” of sorts for a couple of Jesus' earliest followers.

Today's reading from Luke chapter 24 finds us back on Easter Sunday – the *first* Easter Sunday. As the story went, some of Jesus' female followers had discovered the empty tomb early that morning and had shared the news of Jesus' resurrection with his closest male disciples.

Those disciples had not believed the women... and so they remained rather fearful and grief-stricken. Later in the day, the story of today's reading occurred when two of Jesus' other male followers were making the seven-mile journey from Jerusalem to a town called Emmaus.

While they discussed the events of the week – Jesus' trial, his crucifixion, and his death – the resurrected Jesus met them on the road and walked with them. The men did not recognize him, however, and they chatted with him as though he were a complete stranger.

Jesus asked them why they seemed so upset and they explained about their Lord's tragic death. “By what he did and said, he showed that he was a powerful prophet who pleased God and all the people,” they said. “Then the chief priests and our leaders had him arrested and sentenced to die on a cross. We had hoped he would be the one to set Israel free.”

“We had hoped he would be the one...”

That's these disciples' way of saying, “We had hoped Jesus would make everything right again, that he would fix everything – that everything would be

different... everything would be better...everything would be good – *all* the time.” And that just didn't happen.

See, for centuries, Jesus' people – the Jewish people, the people of Israel – had been living under the occupation of one political empire after another... and they were sick of it. In the midst of their oppression, God had promised them that, one day, a Messiah would come to save them.

Many of Jesus' people were expecting their Messiah to come by military might – they were expecting their salvation would come through a violent overthrow of whatever outside government was occupying their land. They wanted their land to be *their* land, once and for all.

As they understood it, when God sent the Messiah, that Messiah would kick out their occupiers, and control of Israel would return to *them*. But that's not what Jesus had been doing. He had not built a military coalition and he had not made any obvious effort to oust the Roman authorities who were occupying Israel during his lifetime.

Jesus did not look like the kind of Messiah so many of the Jewish people were expecting God to send... yet, he'd healed countless people and thousands had gathered to hear him teach and to witness his miracles.

Incredible things, yes – but not the things the Messiah was *supposed* to do. At least... not what anyone *thought* the Messiah was supposed to do.

“We had hoped he would be the one to set Israel free.” That's what those disciples said on that walk to Emmaus the first Easter Sunday.

“We had hoped he would be the one...”

In some way, don't we *all* hope following Jesus means everything will be okay? Don't we all hope following Jesus means everything will be made right in our lives? Don't we want desperately to think that following Jesus means all the chapters of life will fall neatly into place – and that they will be filled *only* with joy and peace?

“We had hoped Jesus would make everything right again, that he would fix everything – that everything would be different... everything would be

better... everything would be good – *all* the time.” Unfortunately, that just isn't how it works.

Life on earth *is* often fraught with grief, struggle, and loss of hope – it's possible no one knew that fact better than Jesus' first followers.

In those days immediately following his crucifixion and death, surely they wanted nothing more than to crawl onto a Friendship Bench of their own, willing the Lord himself to sit in the open seat next to them.

Well... as it turned out, that is what happened on the road to Emmaus. Though the two men didn't fully realize it at first, that dusty road *did* become a sort of colorful “Friendship Bench” as Jesus joined them on their seven-mile journey.

On that journey, the risen Lord brought the men renewed hope in the midst of their grief and despair. *That is* the good news of this story. And with that good news in mind, I couldn't help but think about a poem that is likely quite familiar to many of you – the poem “Footprints in the Sand.”

This poem has become so present and so sentimentalized in Christian culture that some of us may have lost hold of its message. If that's you, I hope you'll *now* hear this popular poem with newly opened ears... it goes like this:

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonged to him, and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it. 'Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints.

'I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you would leave me.'

*The Lord replied, 'My precious, precious child. I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.'*²

Friends, life is a journey fraught with challenge – a journey that's sometimes filled with deep disappointment, with grief, and with hopes destroyed. But life is also a journey with those who come alongside us through it all... a journey with those who join us on our Friendship Bench.

That first Easter day 2,000 years ago, the resurrected Jesus joined two of his followers while they were walking to the town of Emmaus... he joined them in the midst of their grief and their deep questions.

They did not recognize him at first, but the Gospel writer Luke tells us they felt their hearts “warmed” while they walked with him.

They were in deep grief. Their minds were full of questions and fears. Yet Jesus joined them on their journey and they knew in their hearts – they knew in their very souls – God was with them. In that assurance of God's presence with them on their journey, the men found a renewed sense of hope in the midst of their despair.

And so... This day and always, may we give thanks to our amazing God for those who come alongside us through *all* the chapters of our lives – the joyful, peaceful chapters... and, perhaps most especially, we give thanks to God for those who come alongside us through the messier, troublesome, lonely, grief-filled chapters of life.

May we give thanks to God for the dear ones who join us on our journey because they truly are the risen Christ in disguise... and these dear ones are added footprints on our journey.

² “Footprints in the Sand.” Author contested <http://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/books/2004/04/whose-footprints-is-it.aspx?>