

# AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

MAY-JUNE 2017

Dear Friends,

I love the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It's a post-Easter story, of course, where Jesus once again appears but is unrecognized, at least at first. It reminds us that understanding the power of Easter is not automatic or an immediate experience for most everybody. The reality of resurrection is not an easy or obvious thing to grasp—on any level, at any age—then or now.

For those two ordinary people walking the road to Emmaus, their Easter morning had begun in confusion, with lots of questions and without any obvious answers. It had begun in the midst of trauma, of grieving, of sorrow and despair. They were in shock, trying to figure things out, trying to make sense of what seemed to them senseless. And so they were walking and talking.

And while they were walking and talking, Jesus appeared, though unrecognized, and joined the conversation, interpreting the events that had occurred and placing them in the context of the story of salvation from Moses and the prophets. Yet, even with this magnificent, learned, and insightful recitation of salvation history, the two sojourners still didn't recognize Jesus.

Only later was there an awakening. It came, as we often say in our communion liturgy, "when Jesus took bread and broke it." Only then, were the travelers transformed—from those with *slow hearts* to those whose *hearts burned within*. It was the entire encounter—Jesus's words, his presence, and a supper shared in the Spirit—that had ignited their hearts.

It was a brief moment of clarity, and it gave them new eyes with which to interpret not only the past but life now and into the future. It confirmed for them that the God who had taken human form in Jesus and lived among us, sharing joy and sorrow, loving the poor and the outcast, and suffering the indignities of our inhumanity, our religious rigidity, moral authoritarianism, political expediency, ignorance and indifference, and the degradation, injustice, and violence that comes from our distorted human relationships – that this God was still lovingly present in hopeful solidarity with the best that is human, in spite of our foibles, frailties, conceits and cruelties.

These brief moments are so important, not only then but now. They confirm that God has been with us all along, even when we are unaware. They confirm that our risen Lord is walking with us—whether we are slow of heart or ablaze with the sense of a powerful presence.

It seems to me that this is the nature of evangelism in today's world—people of faith walking with others (friends and strangers alike), listening deeply to their stories, asking questions that take our engagement and understanding to a deeper level, perhaps even sharing a meal, and all the while paying attention to matters of the heart and the Spirit. Where and how is God present in this encounter? What is God saying to each of us? What are we learning about God's intentions for us and for the world? Where are we being challenged? Where are we being affirmed? If the Emmaus story is to be believed, we might only recognize the presence of Christ in retrospect, upon reflection.

My friend and pastor, Roy Howard, is back on the Camino in Spain. He's walking it again, taking a different path from the one he walked two years ago, because he found it to be a profound experience of spiritual transformation, of expanding wonder, gratitude, and love. Roy walks to engage the people he meets along the way, people from around the world, each walking for their own reasons or for no reason at all. As he noted, the folks he meets on the Camino are

largely those who do not identify with any religion, the so-called spiritual but not religious people who constitute the fastest growing demographic not only in the United States, but in other parts of the world as well. On the Sunday of his send-off, his congregation commissioned and blessed him not only as a spiritual pilgrim, but as an evangelist as well.

Preparing for this journey, he posted a sentence with art work on his Facebook page, from Emmanuel Levinas, a French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish descent: “A relational life is dependent on encounters that are revelatory.” Roy commented: “I love the phrase: ‘relational life.’ This seems so true to me and especially as I prepare to walk again into the unknown. The holy stranger is always near.”

As a pastor in Philadelphia in the 1980s, I served a wonderful congregation of people who were deeply committed to worship, education, and social action. They had a history of engagement with issues of human rights, economic justice, and peacemaking. That commitment continued through my 11 years as their pastor, and it continues to this day.

But over the years I discovered unexpectedly that some of those congregants had lost the connection between their passion for justice and peace and their biblical and theological roots. They knew it was important to protect the vulnerable, to work for peace, to seek justice for the oppressed, but they couldn’t articulate the biblical foundations for these concerns. And, they were also a little skittish about prayer, whether understood as talking to God or listening to God. They loved to sing. They paid close attention to sermons (the good, the bad, and the ugly...). They took great care of one another in times of trouble, sickness, and sorrow. They worked to make the world a better place in a variety of ways. They were exemplars of the fruits of the Spirit, but they had lost their connection to the roots of their faith. In a very real sense, they were just like those two sojourners on the road to Emmaus.

This is a problem not only for Christians today living in a post-Christian world, where the spiritual but not religious are on the rise, but it’s a problem for the generations to come—our children and grandchildren. It’s a critical task for congregations to think creatively and afresh about how they are sharing the good news of the gospel with children and young adults. The traditional models of Sunday School, Christian education curricula, confirmation classes, and youth groups may work for some congregations, especially the larger ones (though I worry about soccer games and swimming meets and baseball practices, etc.) But what happens in those smaller congregations where these models are no longer viable?

How do we engage this generation of sojourners—and the next—and help them grasp the reality and power of the risen Christ in a world on the brink?

May the Spirit of Christ dwell in your hearts as we enter the season of Pentecost.



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald,  
President and Professor of Faith and Public Life

*P.S. – The academic year ended with the joyful shouts of happy students receiving their diplomas at our recent commencement exercises. In a week or so, our classrooms will again be pulsating with the lively conversations of DMin students. New educational opportunities are being rolled out in our Program in Christian Spirituality. Our enrollment numbers for the fall are encouraging and we are cautiously optimistic about a significant increase. We hope to end the year with a strong showing of financial support. The Center for Innovation in Ministry is thriving. Thank you you for your gifts and prayers!*



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