23 April 2014 Joseph Britton
Community Eucharist

Beginning with Moses and all the prophets,
[Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. (Luke 24:27)

Maybe it's just me—but don't you wish that as long as Jesus had taken the trouble to explain the whole of scripture to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they had at least written down what he said? Just think of it: Jesus himself delivers a short systematic theology, and no one thinks to put quill to parchment. What *were* they thinking?

But like so much of this enigmatic story, the fact that Jesus' interpretation of scripture gets only a passing mention should signal to us that if we focus too much on wondering what Jesus said, we are somehow missing the point and need to look again. As one commentator has put it, the message of the story of Emmaus is the triumph of experience over explanation. After all, even when Jesus has explained everything about himself to the disciples, they still don't recognize him. Instead, it is only when they experience him through the memorial act of breaking of bread that they see him for who he is. It is not enough for them (or us), in other words, to know *about* Jesus, we need to *know* Jesus. Or to put it in church speak, we need to *discern* his presence in our lives.

Now, I want to take up this issue of discernment with you as it is suggested by the Emmaus story, and explore it a bit further, especially since a divinity school is a place where a lot of discernment goes on—admissions committees discern whom to admit, students discern what vocations to pursue, faculty discern whom to promote and whom to let go. Indeed we talk about discernment all the time here, as though we know what it means, though if the truth be told it often is a cloak for something quite prosaic and sometimes even desperate, as when "I'm in discernment" really means "I need a job," or "I don't know what to do with my life."

More substantively, however, I think one could say that discernment refers to a challenge that comes to us from the supper table in Emmaus: the challenge always to be open to encountering the strange and unexpected, to be ready to reconsider what we are most certain about, and to entertain the possibility that we have been very wrong in our perspective on things. In short, discernment means to be open to the questioning presence of the Lord.

St. Ignatius Loyola, of course, was a master of this art of discernment (and I am overjoyed that Professor Ruffing has offered many of you this term an opportunity to explore his insights in her class). For Ignatius, the key to discernment is a regular and recurrent examen of conscience in which one calls to mind God's presence, and then measures one's actions and reactions against that impinging reality. Ignatius wants us to ask this question of ourselves: If God is present in this very moment, in this very place—how are the thoughts and emotions which I am experiencing either compatible or incompatible with that loving, merciful gaze in which I am held? Ignatius realized that if you ask that question of yourself often enough, in enough different places, you begin to get a sense of whether your life is directed toward God (what Ignatius calls consolation) or not (which is desolation).

In theory, that sounds fairly simple. But Rowan Williams, when asked how we know what God's will is, famously said, "Well, we don't. That's the joke of it. The best we can do is to try to perceive which course of action leads in a more Godward direction, and then be prepared to change course when we realize that we've made a wrong decision." Discernment, in other words, is all about changing course as necessary—or about repentance, if you want to use another churchy word.

But elsewhere, Williams ups the ante a bit. Those of you who are Berkeley students will remember his two meditations on vocation that we read together in the very first semester of junior year. "Vocation," Williams says, "is the residue that is left when all the games of self-deception have ceased." We only know what God calls us to do and to be, in other words, when we have become brutally honest about who we already are, with all of our self-serving, self-aggrandizing sense of entitlement.

And this kind of honesty requires a particular attention to rooting out the fictions and fantasies by which we tend to live—fictions by which we convince ourselves, for instance, that we are more important than we really are; or conversely, that other people are worse than they really are. Williams has a memorable way of putting it: we are all more inclined to think of ourselves as more suitable to play the lead role of Hamlet than, say, the role of second gravedigger.

Now, it has seemed to me that one of the chief roles for the dean of a school is to encourage both the institution and the individuals within it to aspire to this very idea of vocation—a vocation (or mission if you will) that is born out of a full and honest assessment of the working reality of one's life.

That conviction has, I suppose, gotten me in trouble a few times, like one Wednesday night early on (when chapel attendance was pretty thin, if the truth be told), when I said a bit vexedly to the students, "I don't know about you, but I think a sure sign of an authentic priestly vocation is the ability to get out of bed in the morning and get to Morning Prayer." That earned me one of these shirts. (SHOW) But it did increase chapel attendance.

Or there was another time when I preached on the importance of conviction and commitment in ministry, and used as an illustration a question the first rector I worked for asked of me before he hired me: "You aren't on some kind of journey are you?" I think we actually lost a few students that night.

Or yet again, there was the time I wrote a white paper on how Berkeley Divinity School's position within an ecumenical divinity school, and in a secular university, puts it on the fringe of the church, where its greatest asset is the opportunity to make its students conversant with both gospel and world. Some said to me afterward that they actually preferred the safe center.

But all this, in one way or another, is related to the question of discernment. It's related to the fact that while Lent is liturgically only a season, spiritually it is the continual state in which we live: the need for self-examination, repentance, and amendment of life. It is sometimes glibly said that we Christians are an "Easter people," which is true as far as it goes. But it is also equally true that we are a Lenten people.

Because ultimately, it's about forming lives in whom one can see Jesus, since that's finally what makes the idea of God credible: visibly pious lives (there's the piety word) that have been touched by God such that God's presence shines through them in a manner that other people can see. Think back to tonight's gospel: even though Luke skips

right over Jesus' interpretation of the scriptures with barely a nod, what he *does* record in great detail later on in the Book of Acts is the effect that Jesus has in people's lives. Those are the kind of lives that make not only belief in God credible, but belief in humanity and its transformability—or in other words, Christian faith. And even one such life becomes in its own way, a kind of revelation of the existence and trustworthiness of God—not unlike what the disciples discover in the supper in Emmaus.

So this is what I wish for all of you: to be able to live lives that will make God credible to others. That is the end goal of discernment; it is the end goal of formation; and it is the end goal of seminary education. And if this school of divinity has in some way played a role in helping you to achieve that goal—whether as students, or faculty, or trustees, or staff, or alumni, or simply friends—then it is has all been incredibly worthwhile.

Now to God be the glory, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

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