

I spent several days last week in Indiana at a conference on the campus of Valparaiso University. It's the Institute of Liturgical Studies and, this year, the theme was "Finding Our Rhythm, In The Fullness of Time." The plenary speakers, workshops, and worship opportunities all focused around the theme of time: how we keep it, how it impacts us, how it gives meaning to our lives of faith.

One of the plenary speakers was James K.A. Smith, a philosopher who has a way with the intersection of philosophy, theology, and culture. He argued that, in general, we are not great at approaching time in a healthy way. By we, I mean both as Christians and as participants in our current cultural environment. We struggle to situate ourselves appropriately in history, tend to think of ourselves as being a-historical, above time, that somehow *we* are the only human beings that have ever existed who will not, one day, be relegated to the stories of history.

The danger with this, is that it allows us to ignore the way history and story and our collective past informs the present. It allows us to think that we were dropped wholly formed into our world and that the past of our faith, the past of our nation, the past of our families and communities has had no bearing on our shaping at all.

To be honest, it got pretty in depth. And I am certainly not qualified to regurgitate a hour-long philosophical exploration or even to summarize it in a great way...but it got me thinking. In particular, it got me thinking about this morning's text, the walk to Emmaus. We don't know why Cleopas and this other disciple, whoever they are, his wife, someone else, were walking to Emmaus. The text doesn't tell us. But they're talking about what happened.

And I wonder if they're talking about it all, grounded in the history and time that they've experienced, or if they're talking about it in a more detached, clinical way.

Because when Jesus comes alongside them, they are looking sad, but lay out the facts of the last several days in a pretty orderly fashion, catching this stranger up on what's been going on. To me, it feels like maybe they aren't fully letting themselves dive deep into where they're at, what they're feeling.

When they finish their recap, Jesus (the stranger) seeks to reinsert them back into the history that has happened, insert them back into the timeline of what has happened, to reconnect them to the larger story unfolding.

And so he does. He interprets all of scripture, going back to Moses and the prophets, and it seems like this is the beginning of pulling the disciples back in, tethering them back to everything that has gone on before. Knot by knot, securing them back into the history of God's work in the world, until finally, sitting around a table, Jesus breaks bread, and that last piece of disconnect locks into place.

Jesus, through his recounting of scripture and time accompanying them, helps them settle into *their* place in the story.

It's not that they weren't always participants. Of course they were! But they had been able to separate themselves: from both what is currently happening and from all the lead up to it. And it takes this time with Jesus for them to realize or remember it. "Were not our hearts burning within us?" they ask each other. In other words, their bodies recognized their role and position before their minds were freed to do the same.

One of the reasons this interpretive lens struck me so hard this week is that I think this disconnect, this separating ourselves, this notion that we are *observing* history rather than *participating* in it, is something that happens more than we realize. And the biggest example of this is pitfall of dangerous nostalgia.

Nostalgia, on its own, is not necessarily a problem. We all have times in our lives that we look back on with fondness. TV shows or music or food that hits us with a flood of memories. The piece of furniture or item of clothing that sticks with us. I always think about a gravy boat that my grandma used every holiday meal—when we cleaned out my grandparents' house after their deaths, it was one thing my cousins and I all agreed could definitely *not* get donated.

So, feelings of nostalgia are not dangerous in and of themselves. But all too easily, they can *become* dangerous, when we let that nostalgia block us from seeing things as they really were, and as they really are.

In churches, this means that we look at our congregational history and tend to *only* remember the times when things were good: when attendance was growing and things were active. Even if there were unhealthy patterns behind the scenes, or even larger numbers of people *not* actively participating, we paint those times in rose colored glasses.

On a larger scale, we look at religious affiliation in general and pine for a time when many more people belonged to a church, without acknowledging that just because membership was greater doesn't mean that discipleship was greater or that faith formation was greater or that participation in God's mission was greater or more impactful.

We look back on certain times in our nation's history and often zero in on the highlights, ignoring the pieces and parts that were far from beneficial for others. An example given by James Smith was about when he was watching *Mad Men* when it was first airing ten-plus years ago. He could watch it and think, "Boy, it would have been cool to live back then!" ...But he could only think that because of who he is. A woman, a person of color, a person *not* making lots of money on Madison Avenue, experienced life in a very different, less rosy way. And to ignore that fact is to ignore the actual history.

And when we ignore that actual history, it keeps us from being in real and deep relationship with each other. Imagine trying to form a relationship with someone who had been abused by a parent. And instead of listening, and remembering, and acknowledging that hurtful past, you just said, “*That’s not how it was!*” Think about the *good* times. It doesn’t do any good to remember the bad.” That person would know pretty quickly that you weren’t someone they could trust.

The story of Emmaus reminds us that we can’t be separated from history, good *or* bad, that the past plays a vital and pivotal role in how our present is shaped and how our future will form.

Jesus, even as he is not recognized, highlights that history for the disciples, both good and bad, the whole understanding of God’s history with humanity, and ending with the final passion account. Without that historical grounding, the resurrection doesn’t mean the same thing. Without God’s relationship and storied past with Israel and creation, the love expressed through that death and resurrection does not hit the same high mark and deep meaning.

And, it is only after all of this is put in proper perspective that the disciples realize what it all means. And that realization sends them right back to Jerusalem to share what happened with the other disciples and to help *them* recognize their place in the grand history of God’s salvation.

We are part of that story, too. We read the Bible, sometimes thinking that we are so separate from these earliest Jesus followers and certainly so separate from the figures of the Old Testament, but they are our history. And we are the history of those who will come after us. We are connected to each other, for better or for worse.

As you go about your weeks, your months, your years ahead, consider your role in the larger picture of *God’s* story, *God’s* history. Let it remind you of your connection to the company of saints who have gone before us—*and* let it encourage you to live in a way that will make the saints who come after us proud.

Amen.