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## *Sermon by Camilla Grayson*

### **Youth Sunday**

### **Luke 24 13-35**

Whenever I'm at a live show, there is always a moment, after the band has set up, tested their instruments, performed sound check, and then, during their performance, where I close my eyes. I close my eyes and let the music sink in, let it fill every space in my heart, let me feel the warmth of my newfound friends dancing, and just soak in that intense happiness of the room. Every good show I've ever been to has that moment, that moment where the audience just feels so lucky to be a part of something greater than themselves.

For those of you who know me, you know that I am heavily invested in supporting the music industry. I pay for my music and regularly attend concerts. It is really special to me to know that I am doing my part to support someone's dream. I was at a show this year seeing a band called Neutral Milk Hotel on a very rare reunion tour. The band's singer, Jeff Mangum, rarely makes public appearances and has been named as one of indie music's most reclusive songwriters. So, this was big. At the sold-out show, people's excitement felt like electricity buzzing through the air. Everyone was enjoying talking with each other about the band's history and the crowd's favorite songs. I had conversations with the people around me and really bonded over our love for music. Then, all of a sudden, the lights lowered and we were met with an acoustic song that transformed into an accompaniment with live horns and strings. It was one of the most beautiful concerts I've ever been to. When the show ended and Neutral Milk Hotel had finished their encore, the crowd didn't move. Everyone was in silent awe of what we just witnessed.

When we finally left, I walked out of the theater feeling like I was surrounded by my closest friends. There is something so uniting about sharing an experience with someone. We felt like we had just gotten to know, not only parts of ourselves, but parts of our contemporaries around us. I've found that music produces individual responses, but everyone is bonded by their own introspective moments. We all shared the comfort we felt in our concert routines. When you experience something so magical like that, it's almost impossible to distance yourself from those who saw it with you. Neutral Milk Hotel's concert was the wonderful payoff of my routine of just soaking in the moment. Regularly attending concerts gave me friendships and understanding towards the world around me. I understood the connection between practicing a routine and the fellowship that comes from it.

A few years back, when I was in sixth or seventh grade, I started to tag along with my brother Patrick and go to the Cathedral's bible study. I remember begging my mom to not make me go. Also, it was during the summer, so while my friends were running around outside and going on trips to the beach, I was stuck in a room with what I thought were some kind of Jesus freak high schoolers. And to make matters worse, the youth leader wasn't even there, and it was a high school girl leading the discussion. After introductions, my brother talked with his friends while I just nervously nodded. We finally started, and I can't even remember what we talked about, mostly because I was nervously sweating about how I was going to ever live my middle school awkwardness down in the presence of all these older people. Then, out of nowhere, everyone was staring at me and asking me my final takeaway from the verse we studied. I tried to awkwardly pass, but my brother insisted that it was custom of bible study to say what we thought at the end. I rattled off something about how Jesus loves everyone with a reddened face only to have my brother stare at me with embarrassment saying that he had just said the exact same thing. It felt like I had failed, and overall, this experience was horrifying. To me, it seemed like I had embarrassed myself in front of these people I'd always looked up to. Honestly, the other people probably never even

noticed, but I vowed to never come back to bible study ever again.

Well, I've been going to bible study almost every week since that incident. I returned because I saw the closeness of the older kids and wanted to be a part of the comforting and intimate atmosphere they had at church. I learned to establish my routine of going to Church youth group and bible study. I started going every week and over time, I felt brave enough to say my own ideas. I learned to participate in and understand fellowship. For me, bible study and church is an alternate realm where social rules don't apply. A sixth grader is given as much personal respect as a senior, there are no such thing as cliques, and everyone's belief system seemed to be ever-evolving. Participating in the discussion helps discover new concepts for yourself, and also exposes others to new ideas in the process.

Sure, it was hard at first, but I soon became part of the group and eventually was there enough to where I had experiences in common with all the people I was once scared of. My participation built relationships with those around me. If I was myself, rather than stressing about what people thought, I felt comfortable sharing and felt accepted. It was those shared experiences that made me come back. The older kids also created an atmosphere that made me feel accepted. I was different and younger, but I also felt like I belonged. I kept going because I understood the payoff of ritual and routine. I understood that it could make certain situations more comfortable and my commitment could bring faith and fellowship.

I've grown up with the greasy deliciousness of the youth group's Fellini's pizza, and I've learned to contribute towards discussions knowing that I am respected for whatever I share. I've realized that, like the intimacy of shared experiences during concerts, participation in bible study has similar effects. When I could finally joke about what everyone said last week, or understand the connection between a verse and my daily life, I felt like I was part of the group. The church and Rebecca crafted an accepting atmosphere that supported me and my friends through prayer and fellowship. It was through those shared experiences over dinner that I bonded with my friends and God. We shared a certain intimacy at bible study because even though we weren't friends at school and were different ages, we connected over our faith. Bible study had a sort of understanding familiarity that I needed throughout high school. I knew that if I needed to open up, there were people who respected how I felt.

Looking at today's scripture, we see how routines like the breaking of the bread can result in fellowship and connectivity. These travelers, coming from Jerusalem, could of even abandoned Jesus at the crucifixion, but Jesus shows no anger when he sees them. As Luke describes it "they [the travelers] were kept from recognizing him." The travelers were not open to Jesus's identity and Jesus hid from them until he was in a comfortable situation. He waited until he was at their house and breaking bread with them. Jesus uses this familiar ritual of praying and breaking bread to emphasize the importance of breaking bread and sharing experiences ourselves. This ritual led to a wonderful surprise. Jesus, through the normalcy of breaking bread, inspired the travelers to embrace His grace. Jesus used routine to provoke fellowship and understanding with the travelers. He took something that they all were familiar with and transformed it into something that bonds them all together. As we in our lives participate in discussion, listen to others, share a prayer, and break bread, we are sharing in the eye opening process like the travelers. We subconsciously accept our contemporaries identities and love through an established routine and shared connection with them. Just like I bonded with friends through my habits at concerts and I learned to understand fellowship in bible study, Jesus connects with the travelers and reveals himself through his routine actions. After Jesus leaves, the travelers ask, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" The travelers are questioning their receptiveness to a stranger. Their downcast faces when they first met Him, judged Jesus too quickly. They were later proved to be wrong when the breaking of the bread in a comfortable atmosphere revealed the truth about Him. If I had disassociated myself from bible study because I didn't feel connected with the people there, or if I had left the concert because it was full of strangers and was a new situation, I would've missed the moment to share in the wonderful fellowship I discovered. The travelers took a chance to invite Jesus into their home, and Jesus's discussion and meal ignited an honest moment in the travelers' lives. By spending time with Jesus, they were able to identify with his struggles and understand his grace and glory. Jesus created a sense fellowship in their home.

The importance of fellowship is apparent throughout everything we do. Through connecting with others, we can discover people's individuality and our shared common bonds. Our beliefs are constantly being sharpened and shifted by other's lives and perspectives. I've learned so much from people that are different than me through new experiences. When we share a meal, bond at a concert, or break bread in church, we all develop as a people.

There was a study done by scientists in 1998 that basically investigated the body's influence on those around it by measuring heart rate and cardiac energy. What they found, was that people, if in close proximity of each other, can actually develop the same heart rhythm. One subject's EKG could be measured on another person's EEG simply through touch. What this means is that by sharing a calm situation with someone, our body can potentially start to become in rhythm with theirs. This impact of sharing a moment with other people creates a physical response that mimics our emotional response. We subconsciously build trust with others, just like as Jesus ate dinner with the travelers, they felt connected enough, physically and emotionally, to embrace Jesus's divine identity. Instead of "keeping them from seeing him," their eyes were opened. By breaking the bread, Jesus is creating a comfortable atmosphere where the people can understand the goodness of their guest. Their shared meal, just like I share a meal with others at bible study, evoked a response that none of the people expected. When we participate in shared experiences and routines, we embrace each other's identities through fellowship. Jesus was able to forgive and understand the travelers when he bonded with them over prayer.

It's funny how church kids can really understand the value of diversity that comes from parish life. I was talking to a friend the other day, and although she goes to a different church, she is very involved in her youth group. We were joking about how we both hang out with middle schoolers and how we are friends with people who are so different than us because of our youth groups. Our friendships feel sort of absurd, but it makes so much sense to us because youth group has taught us to understand that their differences as people are just what makes them unique. I told her that sure, I can't really relate to sixth grade boys' stories about shaking hands with girl and running away in disgust, but I can listen when they are debating the meaning of a bible passage. I constantly learn new things from listening to opinions that, if not for youth group, wouldn't be easily accessible. Like me, my friend understood the youth group dynamic. As our conversation about our love for fellowship ended, there was a serious note. She muttered something about how much she loves youth group. I felt the pain of our last year swell in her throat as she confessed how her alternate home at church was slowing coming to an end with graduation looming in the distance. I understood. It became so real that next year I am going to be in a different part of the state, not having Fellinis and not laughing with my friends each Tuesday. I won't be discussing my upcoming week in girls' group at Goldberg's, or even coming to the youth hall on Sundays. It's really hard for me to imagine giving up this special place, even though I know it is my time to move on to a new part of my life.

Yet, things from youth group will definitely stay with me. I'm a more patient and accepting person from meeting people each week. My faith is grounded with lifelong friendships that I cherish everyday. I find comfort knowing that I participated in a valuable part of God's plan for me. And most of all, I know how important shared experiences are in building relationships. Like concerts, I connected with those around me through something bigger than myself. Through bible study, I've found that the best way to see who someone really is, is to share something with them. My faith community has taught me that fellowship is a key part of being an Episcopalian. I understand God through his children and my friends in bible study. As I head off to University of Georgia this year, I will remember to push myself to create relationships and routine, just like I did in bible study. Because of youth group and the Cathedral, I am going to remember to be ever evolving, be aware of others, and keep in mind the importance of shared experiences.

In church, we are practicing these same experiences each week. We connect with each other through music, prayer, scripture, and communion. We have the power to create a safe and accepting atmosphere for others. Just as we all were once lifted from solitude to join a community, we can produce the same loving environment for others. Through our shared religious practices, we become a community. I am closer to everyone sitting in this room through our connectivity. We all come from different places and have different backgrounds. We don't all share the same politics or even theology, but our hearts are all beating in one cohesive rhythm towards God. Together, we share this moment right now, and later, when we come to the table for the breaking of the bread, we will be one body in a practice that is truly bigger than ourselves.