

3 Easter A – Fr. Val Handwerker

April 30, 2017

Cathedral

5:00

Theme: Recognizing the Risen Jesus in the estranged among us—as
“companions” on the journey

“On the first day of the week, two of Jesus’ disciples were going to a village called Emmaus...While they were conversing...Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.”

“Their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.” On that first Easter night, what do you think kept those two disciples from recognizing the Risen Jesus, as they walked with him on the road?

Friends: Might we not really see and recognize the Risen Jesus in our midst?

This week, the state of Arkansas executed four men. Our state of Tennessee may return to executions later this year—with as many as nine execution dates set soon.
(1)

In 1984, as the State of Tennessee began to make plans to use once again capital punishment, the Bishops of Tennessee prepared a pastoral letter in order to teach us Catholics about a consistent reverence for all human life.

I was asked to work with the bishops in the preparation of this pastoral letter. In the beginning of our work, we all talked about our experience with the families of murder victims, and with those on death row. I had no experience—it was all in the abstract. The Bishop of Nashville, in 1984, spoke about something that had happened to him. His name is Bishop James Niedergeses; he died about ten years ago. He told us that, soon after he was ordained a priest, he was assigned to be the chaplain at the Tennessee State Penitentiary, in Nashville. He talked about one man on death row—his name, Billy Dixon. As Father Niedergeses visited the men on death row, Mr. Dixon expressed an interest in the Catholic faith. Over the course of months, Father Niedergeses gave him instructions in his prison cell...and eventually baptized him and gave him his First Communion. Sometime

afterwards—on the very night that Billy Nixon was executed by the electric chair—he asked Father Niedergeses to keep vigil with him through his execution. Father brought him Holy Communion, the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ. Then, at 11:00 p.m. Father Niedergeses told us that Billy was given his final meal—a single chicken salad sandwich. As he started to eat it, he tore the sandwich in half—of course, there was no knife—and gave half to Father Niedergeses.

As they were eating, Billy just said aloud: “The Bread of life!” “What?” Father Niedergeses asked. Then Billy added: “They recognized him in the breaking of the bread just like this...and this is the Last Supper for me!”

When Father Niedergeses got home after the execution, he had to throw away all the clothes he was wearing: they were saturated with the smell of death.

In 1984 Bishop Niedergeses remarked that, although it had happened 39 years before, that evening with Billy Dixon made an indelible impression on his faith.

Back when St. Luke’s Gospel was written, toward the end of the first century, the church had the same dilemma as we do: How do we see and recognize the Risen Christ now that he has returned to the Father’s right hand in heaven? Today’s story is the climax of this Gospel, with a surprising lesson: Those two disciples would never have broken bread with the Risen Christ—as we do here in the Eucharist...they never would have recognized him, if they had not offered hospitality to one who, until that time, was simply a stranger in their midst.

Billy Dixon, on the night of his execution, and Father Niedergeses got the Gospel lesson right: The Risen Christ might come to us in the most surprising of persons, masked in one who might be a stranger to us, or estranged from us.

Companions: it means literally, to “share bread with.” And so, we break bread here.

(1) See Chris Bundgaard, “At least 9 execution dates loom for Tennessee death row inmates” (April 24, 2017) @ WKRN.com.