This Sunday we are given another account of the risen Jesus appearing incognito to his followers. This time two companions on the seven-mile road from Jerusalem to Emmaus spend what seems to be at least several hours walking and talking with him, and still they don’t recognize their teacher, the one they describe as a great prophet. This theme we find in the readings from the past few weeks, where even the people closest to Jesus do not immediately recognize him is curious and puzzling.

Just imagine browsing in the stacks at Toadstool bookstore to buy the next selection for the adult formation group here at All Saints’. There is someone right next to you buying the very same book. You comment on their selection, not looking at their face, and just as they are about to leave, you suddenly realize it’s a dear friend who moved to Virginia last year. How could you not have recognized her? Perhaps it’s simply that the chance encounter is so unexpected.

As far as Cleopas and the other disciple knew Jesus was dead, and they told him so to his face. But, perhaps there was something, some spark of familiarity that drew the travelers to listen and to converse with the stranger that joined with them. I think we see what our minds tell us we should see. It made me consider how many times I assume I know something about people the around me…… people I pass on the street, or those of you I greet on this beautiful day outside after worship. How about you? Maybe we draw clues from how people dress, or how they move. Or perhaps there is something about them that seems familiar ……but, we just can’t put our finger on it. But usually we don’t expect to be surprised;…… we see what we expect to see.

I’d like to share my story with you.

On July 13th, 1989 I walked through the parking lot of a church in Ludlow, MA. I remember it was a very hot evening. It had rained a bit earlier; you know, one of those quick downpours that just makes the world that much more humid. Jane, a woman I had spoken to the evening before, met me at the door with a hug and we walked together into the building and down into the basement. We poured ourselves a cup of coffee and took our seats along with around 40 other women and men. As the meeting started people introduced themselves one by one, and then it came to my time. I drew in a breath…”My name is Sandi and I am an alcoholic”.

You see, alcohol had become the center of my life. Despite the fact that I had a fulfilling career, a husband and family who were precious to me, and an active church life, I drank too much. I had tried in vain to control it, but it controlled me. Alcohol became the one in in charge. Whether I was truly conscious of it or not, all my energy and actions were focused on my next drink and on hiding my obsession and addiction from those that loved me. I needed them to see what I needed them to see.

Whenever I share my story with other recovering people I tell them, “God brought me to the Twelve Steps, and the Twelve Steps brought me back to God.” There is a phrase that comes from recovery literature that talks about having *a willingness to surrender to a power greater than ourselves that only the dying can know.*

Death can present itself to us in a myriad of ways. Addiction knows no boundaries; it crosses all social, racial and economic barriers. It is an equal opportunity disrupter of love and relationship, and destroyer of life.

The tragedy and destruction that drug and alcohol addiction leaves in its wake is apparent and clear for us to see in our country, state, communities and families. It is hard to miss. But what about those conditions that are less recognizable to us?

In the course of working with patients affected by substance addiction, psychologist Gerald May was surprised to recognize many of the same characteristics of those affected by the disease within himself. *“I also learned that all people are addicts”*, he writes in his book Addiction and Grace, *“and that addictions to alcohol and drugs are simply more obvious and tragic addictions than others have.”* He goes on to say this, *“Spiritually, addiction is a deep-seated form of idolatry. The objects of our addictions become our false gods. These are what we worship, what we attend to, where we give our time and energy, instead of love.”*

These are powerful allegations, that we all are addicted in some way. Can you feel some resistance inside yourself to the idea of being addicted or to having unhealthy attachments? I invite you to consider for a moment…..Are there places, things, ideas, ways of thinking in your life that draw your attention and energy from what you believe God desires for you? I know that when I was working in consulting, I wore my exhaustion like a badge of honor; I was so dependent for my sense of worth on how busy I was. And relationships in my life suffered as a result.

What about those pervasive narratives and systems in our society, the “isms” – classism, racism, sexism, ageism – that pull us in the opposite direction from true community?

Might our giving way to fears of scarcity,

or of the pervasive thinking that can affect us all, drawing us into looking at our world in terms of

……all or nothing,

…..right or wrong,

… conservative or liberal,

be evidence of our dependency on false gods?

These words from St. Augustine of Hippo reveal our folly; *“God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are always too full to receive them.”*

So, here are some questions we might ask ourselves: What truly **resides** at the center of our lives? What or who is the object of our worship? Where do we find ourselves internally compelled to give energy to things that are not our true desire? What divides us from authentic relationship with God and each other?

I have found incredible diversity in recovery communities. I have shared intimate moments of joy and of brokenness with people I could never have imagined having anything in common. One of the most important pieces of wisdom I received when I walked into the rooms of recovery was to avoid making comparisons of my experience with that of others. I was urged to listen and to look and to feel for places of commonalty that I could find in my own story. It is in the familiar that we recognize the Holy in each other. Just as Jesus reveals himself by the everyday common action of breaking bread with those that shared the journey on the Emmaus Road, we too can listen for and feel the Spirit working in each other.

It is not unusual for people who know I am in a program of recovery to ask me why, after 27 plus years, I continue to attend meetings. You see putting down the drink was just the first step for me. Addiction has mental, physical and spiritual facets. Addiction is a pervasive enemy of the spirit and looks to take hold and to perpetuate itself in all kinds of ways. It lies in wait for us to become complacent and to fall into denial and old patterns of behavior.

The life of recovery I live today represents a daily reprieve, contingent upon my spiritual condition. It is in the company of those holy people with whom we walk and share our brokenness and our hopes, that keeps us centered and continuing on the path that God calls us to journey. People in recovery sometimes refer to addiction as trying to fill a “God sized hole” in us with something else. We all have that space in us and I have come to believe that God placed it there inside of me and of you so that we have the yearning to seek God. And none of the work of recovery happens alone. There is no mistake that the first of the 12 steps starts with “We”; in the same way as our statement of faith in the Nicene Creed. This journey, what the Big Book calls *“The Road to Happy Destiny”,* we take in step with others and with our Higher Power. We walk that journey here at All Saints and we carry what we find into our community with us.

The two faithful disciples that walk with Jesus on the Emmaus road bemoan the loss of the promise of Israel’s redemption they had hoped for in Jesus of Nazareth. In the Breaking of Bread the promise is restored for them and for us.

There is a section of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous called “The Promises”. It comes at place after we have taken a long, hard, honest look at ourselves and we are doing the work of repairing relationships and building new lives. I would like to share a portion of it with you.

*“The spiritual life is not a theory. We have to live it…. If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.*

Dear friends, wherever your week might take you, may you find that the Risen One walks alongside you. May you hear the voice of comfort, hope and challenge in those you meet along the way. May the words of Christ burn within you; and may you recognize the Holy in each and every one you meet. Amen.