

“MEALS THAT NOURISH”

Luke 24:28-35

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This supper at Emmaus is just one of many meals Jesus sat down to in the company of some of his friends. I might even argue that this is the one meal that brings the significance of the others into clearer focus, both for the disciples present there and for those who have heard the story and placed themselves in it. Maybe even more than the meal we call the ‘last supper,’ it defines what it means to be at the table with Jesus.

But well before this, Jesus’ friends were with him at a wedding banquet where they saw him turn water into good wine in an affirmation of the joyful occasion.

When Jesus fed 5000 people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple fish, they absorbed lessons about sharing and about the importance of feeding everyone.

At a banquet in the house of Levi, in the wake of gossip and criticism, they learned that Jesus was more than willing to sit down and eat with sinners.

At a dinner in the home of a respected religious leader, they observed Jesus honor a loving gift above conventional rules about hospitality and “proper” behavior.

At other tables with Jesus, they heard him talk about serious issues, like what it means to keep Sabbath or to be humble or to be forgiven.

Another time, Jesus used the occasion of a dinner party to point out that the kingdom of God is like a dinner party made up of those who are usually excluded.

And the night before he was crucified, they came to know how a meal shared together in a time of crisis can take on deep, poignant meaning... how ordinary things like bread and wine can take on a powerful symbolism. It was only later, though, that what they saw Jesus do and heard him say that night could become a ritual of remembrance that was more about life than death.

At every one of those meals, Jesus’ disciples were nourished not just with food, but with grace and kindness, with teaching in words and by example, with a vision of the kingdom of God.

It’s at this meal in Emmaus, though, where it seems to me that it all finally comes together. They recognize Jesus, not just as the same person with whom they shared all those other meals but as the crucified and risen one.

It seems to me that this recognition has to shed a new light on all those other meals. Ahh... those meals weren't just the necessary daily sustenance! What took place around those tables wasn't just a little random wisdom or instruction Jesus happened to share! So much more was going on, which they couldn't see at the time. It was a sustained pattern – a practice of breaking bread with gratitude, building community, and nurturing faith. Jesus was there, and now they understand in a way they didn't before what his presence means.

I tried to think about how to talk about those things separately – breaking bread, building community, and nurturing faith – but I realized pretty quickly that they sort of flow into one another. I couldn't discern where the breaking bread left off and the building community began, or where building community started to shift into nurturing faith. They are all wrapped up together.

You can look at breaking bread – eating together – in a lot of different ways. The nourishment we need to live. One of life's pleasures. An issue of justice, to feed the hungry. A sign of inclusion: all the family gets to come to the table. Sharing the tastes of a place or a culture. An act of nurture, as we feed ourselves and one another in good ways. A celebration of the earth's bounty and goodness.

However we might look at it, to approach the table and the food on it with gratitude is a given – or it's supposed to be. The way Luke describes Jesus taking the bread, and blessing it, and breaking it ... there's a kind of holiness to that which seems a little foreign to us. Most of us are pretty removed from where our food comes from, we eat on the go, we worry about what to eat, we eat a lot of "artificial" foods, we eat stuff with little nutritional value and other stuff with little taste, and many of us rarely sit down at a table with family or friends to eat food prepared by someone at the table. Those realities make it harder to see a meal as a holy moment. And yet ... all it takes is a little gratitude, a little remembering, a little intention, to reclaim that sense of blessing. And Jesus is there. We recognize his presence.

And when we break bread together, we are building community, connection, bridges instead of walls. Traditionally, to break bread with someone meant that you were – or were willing to be – at peace with them. Sharing food together is an opportunity to practice kindness and welcome and hospitality. It's an important way we get to know one another, discover what we have in common and what makes each of us unique... which is what the body of Christ is all about. When we gratefully partake of a meal together, whether it's a potluck or a banquet or simple food made with love or even a cup of tea or a beer... we are forging the bonds of community. And Jesus is there. We recognize his presence.

And when we break bread together, and build community, we make way for opportunities to nurture and be nurtured in faith. We can talk about real and important things. We can listen. We can ask questions. We can share what we have experienced of God. We can learn that we are not alone in our struggles. We can ask

for advice and help, and maybe give some, too. We can encourage. We can pray. And Jesus is there. We recognize his presence.

We believe these are the kinds of things that happen around the communion table. But surely not only here! One of our seminary professors said that she wasn't all that sure Jesus really meant to institute a "sacrament" of communion as we know it; she wondered if his intention was more broad: to ask his disciples to remember him – to recognize his presence – *every* time they sat down to break bread or have a drink together. What if we looked at every meal together in that light? With family... friends ... church family.

And maybe we might look beyond actual food: what about Bible Study, conversation at Coffee Plus, a meeting, looking at art together, working on a project, playing, talking about a book or the news, ... anything. So many opportunities to receive something together with gratitude, to build community, to nurture faith. So many moments when we might recognize the presence of Jesus in our midst.

I do want to say one other thing about this, though: we are probably more ready for this when we make a *habit*, a practice of being together to share food or nourishment of some other kind... when we are intentional about being community ... when we are actively desiring and seeking to be nurtured in faith. On and off participation in the life of the faith community isn't the same. An occasional dipping into the scriptures is not unlike eating a fruit or a vegetable only now and then. Indifference to what we are nurturing our hearts and minds with doesn't make our faith healthy and resilient.

The disciples with Jesus at Emmaus recognized him in the breaking of the bread *because they knew him*. They knew him because they had spent time with him around the table before. They'd broken bread with him, listened to him, absorbed the things he taught and the way he lived. They were shaped by those experiences, probably more than they knew. They'd been drawn into community with one another, and their faith and understanding had been nurtured, little by little. They were, over time, transformed into people able to recognize Jesus. And when they recognized him, as he broke the bread this one last time, all of that came together for them, and they were no longer afraid but ready to be the bearers of the good news.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.