

*Overflowing Nourishment*

Luke 24:13-35

I'm just back from our annual women's retreat in Santa Cruz, where 42 women from our church are worshiping with us this morning. They're looking at the ocean while you're facing Foothill Expressway, but other than that, it's all the same. We shared a long and slow-paced day yesterday using words and photographs to think about how it might change us if we lived our lives shaped around gratitude—just being thankful for what we already have.

I wish for—and maybe you do too—more of that kind of time. Sometimes when I'm getting ready to preach I wish we could sit here for a few hours on a Sunday morning with our Bibles in our hands—more like Saturday morning Torah school in the Jewish tradition—so that we could flip through our Bibles together. I think that might make it easier to see that the Bible, our tradition's story-book, is really one grand, arching narrative that traces human development. That traces our development *as humans*. Our understanding of what it means to be creatures who were made to carry holiness inside of us.

If we were doing that, I might start with the story that's in front of us today, of Jesus appearing to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, the evening of that first Easter. How Jesus walked up alongside of them, matched his steps with theirs, and they walked together for a good part of that seven-mile distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus *and they didn't recognize him*. How he wasn't surprised when they told him stories of their friend's crucifixion on Friday *and they didn't recognize him*. How he told them older stories from their Bible and re-interpreted them like a Zen master, *and still they didn't recognize him*. How they sat down for dinner together and he insisted on acting as the host, breaking the loaf of bread while he said grace, and handing a piece to them, *and then they got it*. How they recognized him—finally—in that familiar movement of his hands as he handed them a piece of bread, gave them something to eat. Not in his impressive expertise about religion, not even in the timbre of his voice. They recognized him when he broke the bread.

If we were doing a study of this text, I'd put it right up next to the handful of other stories in the Gospels about Jesus showing up after the resurrection—many of which, curiously, also have something to do with eating. Breakfast on the beach with Jesus cooking. The post-death, post-resurrection Jesus walking through walls and locked doors to ask his friends first, “Do you have some food here? I'm hungry.” Over and over again, like a growing teenage boy, he would disappear for a while, but always make it back for mealtimes.

And then we would talk about how many of the stories we have about Jesus somehow involve food. Think about it. Stories of him stretching a few sandwich rolls and a couple of dried fish into a meal for thousands. Stories *he* told, about life in the Kingdom of God, where it's like everyone is invited to sit down together at a meal so lavish, that it looks like a wedding banquet. How the Kingdom of God is like baking bread, where just a small measure of yeast is enough to raise loaves and loaves, enough for an army. How he likened the earth to God's vineyard, where grapes grow abundantly and need to be harvested.

How when Jesus was out in the desert by himself, still very young and still not sure what his life's work was going to be, he was tempted to focus all his attention on becoming the person who could solve the world's hunger problems. 'Take these stones and turn them into bread,' that voice in his head said. 'You could do it.' And he had to think about it before he realized that his calling was bigger than that, that concentrating on food production alone would be selling himself short.

We'd look at the story of Jesus' birth in a manger, which is also about food—a feeding trough, a place where animals eat.

And we would go, finally, to John's Gospel, where Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." (John 6:6)

The central story of our tradition is about a life oddly, interestingly, focused on food. In fact, you might say this whole epic narrative has a *bread motif*.

To be sure, Jesus came from a long tradition of people gathering around meals. Maybe you've heard this one-sentence summary of Jewish history: *They tried to kill us; we won; let's eat.*

When Jesus' slave ancestors were getting ready to escape from Egypt, on the eve of the first Passover, they got a specific recipe from God for the bread they should take with them. It must be baked without yeast, because there wouldn't be time for it to rise. They had to be ready to grab it and go at a moment's notice. When that bread ran out and they were out in the desert, God fed them with a different kind of bread. *Manna*, they called it—a flaky sort of thing, unfamiliar and not particularly tasty, but nourishing enough to keep them fed every day.

Food. Food and God. Food as the reminder of God's presence and care. But watch what happens over the evolution of this story, the repetition of *bread* as the symbol of God meeting human need. In the early days, the first chapters of this narrative about God and humans together, there is just enough food. The people of Israel gathered it up every morning, and it was, every day, enough. But just enough. In fact, it was one of the rules about manna: no leftovers. If you tried to keep it overnight, hold a little back in case you got hungry later, the manna turned rancid, and it would make you sick. God provided what the people needed to live, but for all those 40 years they were out in the wilderness, walking toward the place God had promised to make their home, there was just enough, never any extra.

And then we get to the stories of Jesus, also about there being enough food to fill people's stomachs. Thousands of people, in fact. But then...there were leftovers. Twelve baskets full. Five baskets full. But always, leftovers. Not just enough. More than enough.

Think about Jesus' last evening with his disciples before he was killed, when they also gathered around a meal. How he took bread in his hands and broke it apart so that everyone could have some, and he said, "This is how I want you to remember me." Not once a year when you gather for a religious holiday, not once a month, not even just once every morning. *Every time you eat. Every time you put food to your lips* (which for most of us is a pretty regular activity), he said, remember that I—I whose name means 'God with you'—I am here in that bread.

And that's exactly what those two disciples walking to Emmaus that night saw. They not only remembered Jesus in the breaking of the bread; they *saw* him in it. And it was enough—more than enough. It not only glued their sad, broken hearts back together; it *filled* them with an energy and passion and power they didn't know they could ever feel again. They ran all seven miles back to Jerusalem, so they could tell their friends—and then the whole world—what happened to them.

That meal in Emmaus was just the first time after Jesus died that they saw what has been true ever since: that in the most elemental symbol of this table, bread to fill our stomachs, we are offered again what we need to nourish our hungry, aching, needy spirits. And just like the bread in those miracle stories, what we are filled with here is not just enough. It's more than enough. Enough for leftovers. Enough to fill our hearts until they overflow, so that we too might be part of this great, grand dream that God has had all along, for every person, every piece of creation, to be made whole.