



Westbury
United Methodist Church

Gather 'Round the Table: Finding God in Our Midst

February 7, 2016 | Rev. Taylor Fuerst

Luke 24: Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"¹⁹ He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."²⁵ Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.³² They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

*The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

One Saturday night in August of 2012, a group of tourists spent hours looking for a missing woman near Iceland's Eldgja canyon. The group was travelling through Iceland on a tour bus and they stopped near this volcanic canyon on Saturday afternoon. One woman on the bus left to change her clothes and freshen up. Soon, there was word that a passenger was missing, no one had seen her return; a description was released and about 50 people began to search for her by vehicle and on foot. For hours they canvassed the area. By 3 a.m., the coast guard was getting a helicopter ready to help search for this woman when suddenly the search was called off. The woman was found among the search party; she didn't recognize the description, you see, and so she was, in fact, searching for herself.

Perhaps it is also true that Jesus can be found in the most unexpected places, right in the midst of those who are searching for him.

He tells us that he'll be hard to notice, we may not recognize his description. In Matthew 25 when Jesus is teaching his disciples about the coming of God's kingdom, he curses those who did not care, who did not show hospitality--he says, "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me," and on and on, and the people will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger?" They didn't recognize him as he hid among the least, the forgotten, the invisible, those they refused to welcome, to feed and nourish. But they weren't the only ones who didn't recognize him; no, the ones he calls righteous, the ones who showed hospitality, who fed and clothed and welcomed and visited, they said the same thing: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty and gave you food or drink?" When was it we saw you?

He may not match his description. He may not match the gleaming portrait we hang on the wall--you know with photoshop and airbrushing nobody really looks like their portraits these days. He may show up in unexpected places and unexpected times.

Leonard Sweet says that whenever we break bread together, Jesus is always at the table. Cleopas and his unnamed friend certainly discovered it to be true in the story we read from Luke today. I wonder if, perhaps, the friend is intentionally left unnamed in the same way that a window is intentionally left open, so that we might climb into the story and find ourselves in his seat, at table with Jesus, watching as this stranger takes bread and lifts it, wondering why this guest is suddenly behaving as the host, and then feeling the realization wash over you like a wave, as you seen him for who he really is, and you realize this can only mean one thing: resurrection.

What Cleopas and his friend have in common the ones Jesus called righteous is that they welcomed Christ by welcoming a stranger, and they did so unknowingly. His presence among them was a surprise to both, in unexpected places, and with unexpected people.

We expect to find him here, at the communion table, at Christ's table. He is both the host and the meal, the one inviting and the one offering himself to feed us, to bless us. We know we can find him here, but perhaps we ought to approach our own tables with greater anticipation, greater expectation of meeting Christ there, in that ordinary place, among ordinary people, even strangers.

This is the very mindset behind Westbury's new table groups that will begin in April. After all of this talk about hospitality and welcoming others both into our homes and into our lives, now we are extending you an opportunity to live this out. When you sign up, you'll be

assigned to a group--a group that will probably include some folks you don't know. We are intentionally making the groups intergenerational, to break us out of our regular habits and our regular friends and open us to new relationships, to the strangers in our midst, in these pews. The groups will meet once each month from April to December with no other agenda than to come together for a meal, to welcome one another into our lives, and to find that in our welcoming, in our gathering, God is truly present.

In the ancient Greco-Roman tradition, banquets were a big thing. Lavish displays of food, wild parties, simply the pinnacle of excess and indulgence. I'm not suggesting that you use this as a model for your table group gatherings! But the interesting thing about these banquets is the theology behind it. The party, the excess, the indulgence, was "designed to distract" this pantheon of Gods from any meddling or punishment they might want to rain down on the human population. The Romans reported that 'bread and circuses' didn't just keep people happy--they also kept the God's at a safe distance.

Not so with us. No, we invite God's presence. We ask God to join us, to meddle in our lives, to take not just THIS meal, but our everyday meal, and make it holy.

St. John Chrysostom, the early church father, said that the way that we invite God into our lives is to invite the stranger into our lives. He instructed Christians to "make for yourself a guest-chamber in your own house: set up a bed there, set up a table there and a candlestick...Have a room to which Christ may come; say, 'This is Christ's cell; this building is set apart for Him.'" "Such a room," he says, "will be for the maimed, the beggars, and the homeless." You see, according to Chrysostom, setting a room in our home, or a place at our table, for Christ, changes the way we look at our guests, the care we put into our hospitality,

but it also may change just who our guests are. It may change how we look for Christ to show up, where we search for God, in the unexpected, in the lowly, in the ordinary daily practice of hospitality.

May it be so that in this ordinary practice, in ordinary meals, among unexpected, unsuspecting guests, at a table set for strangers, we find that the one we are searching for is here, among the search party, blessing and breaking bread, making those who thought we were strangers...his friends. Amen.

###