

Sermon Title: They Recognized Him
Scripture: Luke 24:13-43
Location: Warren Wilson Presbyterian
Date: April 28, 2019, 2nd Sunday of Easter
Preacher: Grace Boyer

Do you have rituals when it comes to mealtimes? Either now, or when you were a child? Is there a chair that you normally sit in? Is there a set time? Do your pets join you or are they put behind closed doors while you eat? Are there rules about who washes the dishes? Are there certain foods that make you know you are at home?

My husband and I were discussing this, peering back into our childhoods. Some things were similar in our experiences. For example, we both grew up with the ritual of being asked to wash our hands before dinner, or asking to be excused from the table after dinner. We each had specific seats we sat in when eating at the dining room table.

But we also had our differences. For example, Marc's family belonged to the "clean plate club", you couldn't leave the table until your plate was clean. In my family, you just had to try everything on your plate, but you didn't have to finish it. Marc's family often used a standard prayer like "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food." In my family we would either do sentence prayers around the table or a parent would pray. During some of the years my family lived in Hampton/VA, we did not have a dining room table and so we sat in the living room as we ate and watched the evening news together. Marc's family had a clear "No TV during meals" policy. In my family, holiday meals are never complete without Korean seaweed and green olives. Olives have absolutely nothing to do with Korea, the Boyer family just loves them. What are your rituals? What helps you recognize you are eating at home?

In our passage today, Jesus was recognized while eating a meal with two of his followers. It was Sunday evening, the first Easter, the day the women had found his tomb empty. Jesus had found the two disciples walking on the road, heading to the village of Emmaus seven miles from Jerusalem. He had found them in their sadness thinking that all was lost, and deep in conversation. As they walked together he had explained to them all the OT prophecies and that how his death was a fulfillment of those scriptures: not a failure, but a fulfillment. And when they reached Emmaus, the two disciples invited Jesus to stay with them instead of journeying on in the dark.

For some reason they had not recognized Jesus as they walked and talked. We don't know why.

Instead, it was in their meal together, when Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. It was in that act their eyes were opened and they recognized him. What helped them recognize him? Was it his hands? Were they so familiar or did they have wounds from the crucifixion? Was it the prayer Jesus said as he blessed the bread, the cadence of his words? Was it a gesture he made lifting up the bread? Or was it simply the time Jesus wanted them to see him? Jesus had waited until he had explained all the OT prophecies to them and they were eating a meal together before he opened their eyes.

As disciples, they would have had many opportunities to be with Jesus during meals. The gospels include so many stories. From eating at the wedding in Cana where Jesus turned water into wine. From eating in the homes of Pharisees who either agreed with him or were trying to question him to trap him. From eating in the homes of tax collectors such as Levi or Zacchaeus. (Do you remember Zacchaeus, and the song about the "wee little man" who climbed up in the sycamore tree to see Jesus?) From eating in the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. From meals unrecorded on the road as they traveled or sat around campfires or sat grilling fish at the seashore. To the meal he

shared with them at Passover, that meal in the upper room before he was arrested, where he broke bread and shared a cup.

The disciples would have developed meal rituals together. Who prayed, who sat where, what they ate, who cooked, who cleaned, what they talked about. Somehow in the breaking of bread, somehow in eating together, the two disciples from Emmaus recognized Jesus in their midst. And in the story that follows, when Jesus arrives in the presence of all the disciples gathered in Jerusalem, the way he proves to them that it is really him, the way he proves to them he is alive, is to ask them for food. They bring him broiled fish and he eats it in their presence. From what we can tell, Jesus loved to eat and drink with people, and savor that time together. And so it was in eating together that they recognized him.

At the time of Jesus, there were strict rules about who should eat together. Those who shared the same economic status, social status, values, ideas, religion, politics, dietary restrictions ate together. Pharisees especially were strict on following these rules. So for Jesus to eat with tax collectors, to eat with women, to have people who were richer or poorer eating with him, that was uncommon. Not only uncommon, but it violated the social norms. This propensity to eat with others who were different than him would have been one of the defining marks, recognizable marks of Jesus.

He intentionally ate with an unlikely assortment of people. He lived out a ministry of table fellowship of breaking bread together as a great equalizer. In Luke 13:29 Jesus said that people will come from NSEW and eat together in the kingdom of God. This was a widely inclusive table in Jesus' time of social restrictions, but it was a key part of his kingdom message that everyone was a child of God at the table. And everyone young, old, rich, poor was welcome.

In our modern world, we don't have the same social rules that existed in Jesus' time, so it may be hard to hear the shocking quality of Jesus's action of eating with anyone. Unless you have been in a Middle School cafeteria recently, or Highschool, or even a retirement home cafeteria, wondering who will let you sit at their table. But in broader society, even if the social rules are not there, people still have a tendency to self-group, to spend time with like-minded friends. Our groupings are not always diverse. And in that case, Jesus' pattern to eat with a diversity of people still has challenging power.

In our passage from Luke, Jesus walked ahead as they came to Emmaus, as if he were going on. Literally, the Greek word is that he was "pretending", acting like he was going on. I don't think Jesus came upon the two disciples on the road to Emmaus by chance. He was there intentionally. He came specifically for these two disciples. But he was not going to impose himself on them. He waited for them to take the step and invite him into their home. He waited for them to show him that hospitality, that table fellowship. And in the midst of that inviting, in that hospitality, they recognized Jesus. Not just eating together, but in the act of inviting him in: their hospitality, their enacting Jesus' own message of table fellowship is part of what opened their eyes.

Looking at our world, with the violence we hear about even this weekend in the news, and the political and public rhetoric of our day...I wonder. What does a story about Jesus being recognized in a meal have to do with our current reality? How does it make a difference? Is it relevant? Where is this story real in our midst?

Perhaps it is precisely in these polarizing times that the vulnerability and humanizing that comes with sharing a meal with someone, and showing hospitality is important. To take time to sit beside or across a table from someone and listen. It is not always easy. To pick up bread or macaroni and cheese and pass it around a table. To take the risk to drop our food on our shirt or get food caught in our teeth as any human does and laugh about our shared humanity. To eat together despite

differences in backgrounds, rituals, cultures, values. The example of Christ's inclusive table is maybe still what the world needs. One table at a time. One conversation at a time.

The early Christians pondered how to help people who had never met Jesus understand what he was like. And one of their answers was eating together in their diversity. It was a table fellowship of sharing their food with each other, and sharing their lives.

Each time we have communion we become like the first Christians, remembering Jesus' commitment to eat with anyone. To remember we are connected with people from NSEW, from all over this world, with different languages, cultures, race, country, customs, foods, habits, rituals. And in doing so, the early Church said Christ is in our midst, and we embody Christ in the world.

But it is not just in communion on the first Sunday of the month. It is when we linger over coffee hour after worship. Or at our picnics. Meals in home, restaurants, or at camp where we get to know one another. Conversations over coffee or tea. In the loving care of bringing food to a family that is grieving or recovering, whether baked in an oven or bought prepared and prepackaged from Ingles. It is when we spoon out food at a soup kitchen and take the time to look the person we serve in the eye and treat them with the dignity they deserve.

And despite all my talk about meals this morning, it is not really about the food anyway. Food doesn't have to even be involved. It is the vulnerability of welcoming someone in with love, care and honesty, and the vulnerability of letting someone welcome us in as we are. It was when the disciples offered hospitality that their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus in their midst.

And these two traveling to Emmaus were not in their best shape. They were exhausted, spent with grief and loss and in disarray for the death of a friend, confused in their faith. In this real life reality they offered hospitality to Jesus and let him in to see their real lives. Real church, faithful church is when we know we can arrive as we are, whether exhausted, confused or rejoicing. When we are vulnerable enough to welcome and be welcomed as we are. When we do this, when we are this, we recognize Christ in our midst.