

Hospitality at the Table
Sermon text: Luke 24:13-35
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I. A most memorable meal

What is the most memorable meal you've ever had? There are a number of possibilities that come to my mind, but on this World Communion Sunday, what I think of most is a dinner I got to participate in a couple years ago. It took place on a beach on the Pacific Ocean in Nicaragua outside the colonial city of Leon. The dinner took place because there had been a wedding there. Earlier that afternoon as the sun was sinking into the Pacific a young woman by the name of Aracely married her fiancé, Sergio. And she was surrounded by friends from a ministry called Vida Joven, or Young Life. We have the same ministry here in the United States. And among those friends were a number North Americans. People who were involved in the ministry of Vida Joven in Nicaragua. People from churches in the United States, like the church I was serving, who had gotten to know Aracely when she was just a teenager. We knew that Aracely's father had died in the revolution in Nicaragua in the late 1970's. We knew that she had built into her own life a number of father figures who had supported and encouraged her through the years.

One of those father figures was a Presbyterian pastor who was the director of Vida Joven in Nicaragua. He stood in her father's place, escorting her down the runner placed over the sand. Another one happened to be me. It was such a privilege to be able to be the officiant at Aracely's wedding. After the service we gathered in that open air hotel dining area to share a meal and watch the other Nicaraguan Vida Joven folks, many of whom we'd known for more than a decade, some of whom had gotten married and started their own families. We got to watch their children playing on the dance floor, to see the interactions between Nicaraguans loving and supporting each other, celebrating for Aracely and Sergio, and to be a part of that evening and that meal, it was like a little taste of heaven on earth. It was a most memorable meal.

Special things can happen around the table at dinner. That's what I'd like us to focus on this morning as we look at Luke 24 and the experience of hospitality at the table. This text about the walk to Emmaus may be a familiar one for some of us, but it's often helpful to remind ourselves of the situation. Earlier in the service we heard the first part of the passage, beginning in verse 13: "Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem." If you look back at Luke 24, verses 1-12, you will see that what happened earlier on "that same day" was that some of the women found Jesus' tomb empty. Peter ran to the tomb and confirmed their report. The Master had been resurrected! It was the very first Easter day – only his disciples weren't sure what it meant.

It was on that day these two disciples, one named Cleopas and the other who is unnamed in the passage, were making the seven mile journey on foot from Jerusalem northwest to the village of Emmaus. Not surprisingly, Luke tells us that they were talking between themselves about the confusing things that had happened that day. As they were walking and talking, another traveler fell in with them, listening to what they were saying. We are told that the traveler was the resurrected Jesus, but Luke says that the two disciples didn't recognize him.

The unknown traveler asked the two disciples what they were discussing and they told him about Jesus, the one whom they had hoped would redeem Israel, but who was crucified and dead in a tomb. That is, until some of their women found the tomb open and the body gone. Angels told the

women that Jesus was alive. The stranger responded in a surprising way. He told the disciples they were foolish. He said they were missing the fulfillment of what the prophets declared. He claimed that what they had witnessed confirmed that Jesus was the Messiah. Then in verse 27, Luke says this of the unknown traveler: “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

I wonder what passages from the Hebrew Bible the stranger cited? Maybe, since they had just celebrated Passover in Jerusalem, the stranger reminded them of the first Passover. When the Israelites were slaves in the land of Egypt, and God had spoken through Moses to instruct them to slaughter the Passover lamb and to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the posts of their doors so that the angel of death would pass over the houses of the Israelites, so that they would be freed of slavery in Egypt. And maybe that stranger reminded the two disciples of the words of John the Baptist, “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Perhaps this third traveler helped them to connect some dots – helped them to understand that Jesus’ life hadn’t been taken from him on the cross, rather he had given it freely so that they might be free from the grip of sin and death.

Maybe that third traveler reminded them of God’s suffering servant who is described in Isaiah 53: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” Could it be that what happened on the cross was not that Jesus’ life was taken from him; rather, that he gave it freely to break the power of sin and death over all humanity?

Perhaps the stranger quoted the prophet Jeremiah: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Maybe Jesus was the initiator of this new covenant that the Lord had promised so long ago. Maybe he was the one to write God’s law of love on people’s hearts.

As Cleopas and the other disciple were mulling over all these possibilities, they came to their destination in Emmaus. The stranger, who had been teaching them all these amazing things about the Messiah and how they might understand in new ways what happened to Jesus, kept on walking, as if he intended to continue his journey. But what did the two disciples do? That’s right – they insisted that their fellow traveler join them for dinner and rest for the night. In other words, they extended hospitality to him.

It was when they gathered together around the table at dinner that the stranger acted the part of a host. He took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to those who were at the table with him. In that moment, Luke tells us, their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus. And he disappeared. I love the next part. Cleopas and the other disciple looked at each other and said, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” I’m sure it was the most memorable meal they ever had!

II. Making the most of our meals

As we consider this passage through the lens of biblical hospitality that Tim introduced last week, what can we learn and put into practice personally and in our life together at Church of the Palms? First, we learn that hospitality means being open relationally and conversationally. Given the traumatic and confusing things that had happened, it would have been understandable if the two disciples hadn’t let the stranger in on their discussion. But they were relationally open and amazing things happened – he taught them things that showed them God’s truth. Are you open to conversation – real, significant discussion with people whom the Lord places in your path? It’s an

important aspect of hospitality and listening for what God is saying.

Second, we learn that amazing things can happen when we share a meal together around the table. The two disciples insisted that the third traveler stay for the night and join them for dinner. It was in the breaking of bread that Cleopas and the other disciple recognized the third traveler as Jesus. It was then that they understood the significance of what he taught them about the Messiah when they were walking on the road.

Scripture teaches that the Lord encounters us through interactions with other people. One example is in Matthew 25 when Jesus says, “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...” Our text this morning calls us to consider the same possibility when we gather around the table to break bread with others. We simply don’t know when Jesus will show up in a powerful way in the words or actions of another person.

Years ago, when we were members at First Presbyterian Church in Orlando, a young Associate Pastor would often speak the words of greeting during the worship services. Every time he did, he would say: “Greet the people that are sitting around you. If you don’t know them yet, invite them out to lunch.” I know that part of the reason he said that was because First – Orlando is a very large church and making relational connections can be a challenge. But I think he also had the truth from this passage in mind. God shows up in surprising and wonderful ways when we break bread together.

It’s not magic, but it is supernatural that when we extend table hospitality to others as followers of Christ that can be where we see Jesus most clearly. Friends, as we prepare to gather around this table on World Communion Sunday, may we do so ready to see Jesus – here in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup, and in meals we will share with in the days ahead. Let us pray.