

CELEBRATE AROUND THE TABLE

Luke 24:13-32

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It's happened to most of us, and it's something that can cause nightmares...you send the wrong text message or email to the wrong person. I've heard of it causing people to be fired, it's damaged family relationships and ended friendships. But in one case, a text message sent to the wrong phone number created ripples of good will.

In November of 2016, Wanda Dench texted her grandson a message inviting him to Thanksgiving dinner. She didn't know that her grandson had changed his phone number. Her message instead went to Jamal Hinton, who was then 17 years old. Rather than just replying, "Sorry wrong number," Jamal responded with, "You're not my grandma but can I still come?" She said, "Yes. That's what grandmas do. We feed people."

So Jamal came, and the two families have been celebrating Thanksgiving together ever since. Hinton said that each year the Thanksgiving dinner serves as a time to catch up on each other's lives and events. They rarely watch TV and instead spend hours talking and laughing.

"Time kind of just flies. We don't even realize how long we've been there. They're really good company." Last year, the families spent their first holiday without Dench's husband, Lonnie, who died in 2020 after contracting COVID-19. To commemorate Lonnie, Hinton, Dench and her family held a photo of him while they continued their long-standing tradition.

Netflix is now making a movie about this unusual friendship. When they heard about the interest in making a movie, Dench and Hinton said, "We are excited to share our

story with the world. We hope it inspires more people to reach out and make connections that they wouldn't ordinarily make. We are so blessed to find a genuine friendship brought together by God from a mistaken text message.”

There's something that can happen when people share a meal together. When we gather around a table, open and undistracted, we share more than food. We have communion with each other at a deeper level. We **commune**. We **form community**. We talk and listen, and through the stories of our lives, we come to understand each other better.

For a long time, Sara Miles thought that being a Christian was all about having the right beliefs, and that was a stumbling block for her.

But then, in an experience she still can't logically explain, she walked into an Episcopal church in San Francisco where she lived, and - as she puts it, “a stranger handed me a chunk of bread. Suddenly, I knew that it was made out of real flour and water and yeast — yet I also knew that God, that Jesus, was present in that meal.”

“My first communion.” she says, “knocked me upside-down. Faith turned out not to be abstract at all, but material and physical. I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored.

I came to believe that God is revealed not only in bread and wine during church services, but whenever we share food with others — particularly strangers. I came to believe that the fruits of creation are for everyone, without exception — not something to be doled out to insiders or the “deserving.”

So, over the objections of some of her fellow parishioners at her new church home, she started a food pantry right in the church sanctuary, giving away literally tons of oranges and potatoes and Cheerios around the very same altar where she ate her first communion. “We gave food to anyone who showed up, she writes in her memoir, Take This Bread.”

“At the pantry, serving over 500 strangers a week, I confronted the same issues that had kept me from religion in the first place. Like church, the food pantry asked me to leave certainty behind, tangled me up with people I didn't particularly want to know and scared me with its demand for more faith than I was ready to give.”

Her new vocation didn't turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays and declaring herself "saved." She found herself trudging in the rain through housing projects, sitting on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, taking the firing pin out of a battered woman's Magnum and then sticking the gun in a cookie tin in the trunk of her car. She struggled with her atheist family, her doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of her newfound church.

But, in her words, “I learned that hunger can lead to more life — that by sharing real food, I'd find communion with the most unlikely people; that by eating a piece of bread, I'd experience myself as part of one body. This I believe”, Sara Miles says, “that by opening ourselves to strangers, we will taste God.”

The story Jill/Bill read us from the gospel of Luke is a post-resurrection story. In all of the appearances after Easter, Jesus is at first unrecognizable. Jesus the human being has become Jesus the Christ. It's Easter afternoon, and people are leaving Jerusalem in

droves. The celebration of the Passover is finished and the crowds are heading home. No one has received a phone notification that Jesus has been risen, so those who followed him are sad, confused, and afraid. If it happened to Jesus, could it happen to them? They are living in a time of political turmoil; the friends of Jesus would be a logical target.

They're walking home, a few of the disciples, talking about the events of the weekend. They're talking about Friday - the trials and the crucifixion. The horror of watching the person they loved and admired suffer such a painful death. The strange rumors of what happened early that morning - that the tomb was empty. They can't believe Jesus is gone. Talking about it is all they can do.

While they're walking, a stranger begins walking with them. He finds out what they're talking about and he begins explaining scripture to them - every scripture passage about the Messiah. They walk, they listen, the stranger keeps talking. And then the disciples arrive at their destination. They invite this stranger to stay with them for the evening. They sit down to eat their evening meal together. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it and gives it to them - just as he had done the prior Thursday. And in that moment, they see him for who he is. At the table. They know him in the breaking of the bread.

Every time a meal is blessed and shared, the divine spirit is present, and the table is set for something extraordinary to occur.

When the concentration camp survivor and author Viktor Frankl was at the end of his rope in the horror of Nazi deprivation, every possession lost and every value destroyed, someone gave him a piece of bread. "I remember how a foreman secretly gave me a piece of bread which I knew he must have saved from his breakfast ration," he said. "It

was far more than the small piece of bread which moved me to tears at the time. It was the human 'something' this man also gave to me - the word and the look which accompanied the gift.”

The word, “companion,” literally means, “someone you share bread with.” All human beings need to eat, and all of us need the nourishment that comes from conversation around the table. When we share bread together, there are no more strangers, no more enemies. We become companions.

Next week we will gather around the communion table together. You could think of it as the most sacred meal of all. You may think of it as the meal which reminds us that all of our meals have the possibility of becoming holy.

At a small church between Chapel Hill and Durham, North Carolina, a man who thought he'd never be welcomed in a church has found a place. He still keeps to himself most of the time. This particular Sunday is Communion Sunday. He's standing behind the others, over to the side. He's been attending this church off and on for years. Their pastor says of him, “I know he has survived more than anyone should bear in a life.” His head is bowed, his hands cupped in front of him. His tangled hair clumps down to his shoulders. If you get close, you can smell the dried sweat and stale alcohol. The pastor gets close. “The body of Christ, broken for you.” The pastor rests a chunk of bread in the man's palm. He gulps down a sob before he chews. His shoulders shake; his chest trembles. Tears stream down his cheeks, washing through his matted beard.

After the service he approaches the pastor again and asks to borrow his phone. “Hey, I had to call you to tell you something,” the pastor can hear him say. “I'm with church

people, in the woods by the Walmart, and you'd never believe what just happened." He speaks quickly, loudly. "They let me eat the communion," he says, and then he returns the phone to the pastor who heard it all and who sees, even still, the tears swimming in the man's eyes.

When I talk to couples who are preparing for marriage, I say to them, "Do this for each other. Eat dinner together, as often as you can, undistracted. Turn the TV off, ignore your phones, look each other in the eye. Talk and listen. Share your lives with each other."

You won't believe what can happen when we break bread together. God is present when we celebrate around the table.

*Sara Miles story from NPR; This I Believe

*North Carolina story from Isaac Villegas in The Christian Century