

Sermon: We Will See Him as He Is

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36-48**

Have you ever noticed how some of our most memorable experiences revolve around food? Quite often, it's the guests who matter more than the meal itself. For Luke, the story of Jesus taking bread, giving thanks and breaking it to share with others is central to his Gospel, and it echoes throughout the narrative. All of Luke's meal stories have something to do with repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. He rarely tells us what's on the menu beyond bread and wine – today, it's broiled fish – but we always know who is on the guest list.

In today's reading, the community is a gathered whole once again. Notice that, first, Jesus offers the disciples peace, just as he did last week in John's story about Thomas doubting the testimony of his fellow disciples. Offering peace is a characteristic greeting, not just of Jesus, but of the community too. Paul associates peace with grace.

Then they share a meal, proving that the resurrection is real because everyone knows that ghosts don't eat. After the meal, Jesus says, 'now that you understand me, Scripture says to proclaim repentance and forgiveness' in his name to all nations. So, the church community is a missionary community, called not only to go and do – care for the widows and orphans, feed the hungry, clothe the naked – but also to be witnesses to what is written in the Gospel, especially testifying to Jesus' death and resurrection.

But if we follow today's reading to the end of the Gospel from a slightly higher elevation, we see what looks a little like a worship service: it begins with a greeting of peace and reassurance followed by a shared meal and a short sermon, and it ends with a blessing for the community. This is Luke planting seeds for the early Christian church. He's modeling behavior for us to follow later. All it needs is some music and a few hymns.

Luke describes the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples, and it's one of only two shared with the risen Christ. It continues the story of Emmaus and it leads to the Gospel's conclusion. In Emmaus, Jesus opened their *eyes* with the breaking of the bread; here, he opens their *minds* by explaining all the Scripture that had been written about him.

Just a few minutes ago, in story time, everyone was excited about their faith – they had seen Jesus! Now, with Jesus standing right there in front of them, they think they’re seeing a ghost. Somehow, Jesus had gotten from Emmaus to Jerusalem ahead of them, and that alone must have been unnerving, but now that he stood among them, they were startled and terrified. There’s a difference between having seen him – without recognizing him – and having him present in the flesh. Jesus goes out of his way to reassure them, as he said, ‘that it is I myself.’

In Emmaus, the risen Lord was present in and through a stranger on a journey. Here, he is truly present among the community. But he is different now; he is no longer the Jesus of Nazareth they had known. Now he is also with them as a sign and a symbol, as a sacrament.

Eventually, though they still can’t figure this out, they become joyful and their stress melts away – Jesus is among them. Even so, he had to ask if they had anything to eat when they ought to have offered him food without any prompting. So, they are still a little off their game.

The good news is, overall, we’re doing okay; we take our commission seriously around here. But not everyone on the outside does. Some people can’t be trusted to take proper care of a cat or a dog, while others can’t seem to get through the day without killing some of their own people.

We live in a world of war, poverty, death, and disease. It’s not a happy place for many people, or indeed, for many of God’s creatures. And even though it seems that God is absent in the world, Howard Thurman reminds us that ‘the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate.’¹ It is God who offers peace and gives forgiveness and mercy. God offers hope, compassion, and love to a world that sorely needs it.

In verse four of his letter, John makes a link between belief and behavior: as we believe, so we behave. Faith requires ethical behavior. God sets a high bar, and religiously observant people work hard to meet it. It’s always front and center to our thinking. This is not to say that non-religious people don’t behave ethically because they do. But to the wider world, if we slip up, that makes us hypocrites. It also proves our humanity. Fortunately, Jesus and Scripture tell us that God forgives the repentant.

In his letter, John wrote, ‘we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.’ Luke might have said, ‘we will see him as he is in the breaking of the bread.’ He would like us to emulate the two disciples who offered hospitality to a stranger on the road to Emmaus. As the risen Lord

was present to them in the stranger, so too was the risen Lord present to the stranger in the two disciples.

Not only are we called to share our meals together, but Luke implies that we need to share our faith together too. We all need to know how we're all doing. We must constantly check in with each other, to help lighten the load. And we do. If someone is struggling, the church community is called to listen and to offer support and maybe even a ride when you have no other way of getting around. That's what a church does. By helping each other out when times are tough, we proclaim the kingdom of God in a very subtle but important way.

At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples that he wouldn't eat or drink again 'until the kingdom of God comes' – with his resurrection, that time is now, as he proves in Emmaus and again back in Jerusalem. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus taught that his whole life, death, and rising were about what God is doing in the world, and that is, bringing the world back to God. The story is not over. God still has something to say.

Amen.

¹ Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community* (richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), 6.