



I Want Jesus Too We Know the Lord Jesus in the Breaking of the Bread

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
April 6, 2008*

Luke 24:13-35:

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 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?" 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, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 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. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 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?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Getting started takes some doing: A couple of the young ladies arrive with great flair, twirling their skirts, showing off their shoes or latest hairstyle. Some members enter with a warm smile, recognizing a pal, while others are timid and tentative, do all that they can to not be noticed. Some, of course, pay no attention whatsoever to the others assembling, preoccupied with their own thoughts and concerns.

These are the children who gather each Sunday for our worship across the way at St. Peter's House. Anywhere from two months to four years of age, they dismount from strollers, crawl down from shoulders or march in proudly on their own steam. Their parents usually come too. It takes a while to get settled and focused; we're easily distracted over there. But I don't imagine it's all that different for us here in the big church; we're just a little less obvious about it. Paula gets things going with a song, usually we have to stand and stretch or shake or dance or clap or parade about. Then there's a story often told with some props, and a lot of commentary; some more distractions. We sit on little yellow and blue chairs in a circle.

Whatever else happens—and a lot of different, unpredictable things happen—most everyone settles down and pays attention when we set the table. The table is about eighteen inches off the ground. I kneel at it; I don't know how Claire does it. Many of the congregants pull their little yellow chairs right up close so they can lift their hands when I do and be ready for the bread just as soon as it's broken. Harry likes to put his favorite red truck right up on the altar.

When I was growing up it was the custom in the Episcopal Church that one did not receive Communion until one was confirmed, the thinking being that it was important to understand the sacrament, to have some knowledge about what it meant. That changed in 1979 with the revision of *The Book of Common Prayer*, which made two important distinctions. One. We affirm that “Holy Baptism is full initiation . . . into Christ's Body the Church;” it is not partial, nor a stepping stone; it is full initiation. Through it, therefore, one may participate fully. Two. We now recognize implicitly if not explicitly that a sacrament's efficacy is not dependent upon our understanding thereof. You and I do not need to understand the theological intricacies of how grace is conveyed through the sacraments in order to receive that grace.

That's a good thing, because even with seminary training, I don't know that I really understand how grace works any better than do those congregants at the altar next door who reach out with eager open hands. I recall one child saying to his mother, with hands outstretched, “I want Jesus too.” Gathered in a circle; a feast prepared and offered; everyone partakes. I'm not sure we need to understand a whole lot more than that. “I want Jesus too.” “Give me this bread.” Thus do we proclaim each time to every one and to any one, at that altar and this one: “All who seek Christ are welcome at this table.” There's an added bonus when you worship next door: Claire makes real bread, and if there are extra pieces left over, which there generally are, we pass around seconds.

It was in the breaking of the bread that Cleopas and the other disciple knew the risen Jesus in their midst. Not as he walked along with them, not as he explained the scripture to them; it was in the breaking of the bread. We're now a couple of weeks past Easter, but the Gospel passage, on the road to Emmaus, takes place that very afternoon. This is one of Jesus' first appearances. It is reasonable to imagine that Cleopas and his companion occupied that withdrawn, wounded, bewildered space that permeates life during extreme grief at times of death. In the breaking of the bread were they drawn forth from themselves, drawn forth from their perceptions of isolation and desolation; their eyes opened, and their fellow traveler seen and recognized as if for the first time, and themselves known and loved once again.

To appreciate how fundamental, how essential it is to gather at the table, we need only consider what it feels like if one were not permitted, if you were excluded. You may be aware that this summer the Archbishop of Canterbury will host a meeting at Lambeth Palace for all the bishops and archbishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion of 75 million souls. (The Episcopal Church is the American branch of the Anglican Communion.) The bishops have gathered at Lambeth every ten years since 1868.

You may also be aware that there are terrible divisions tearing at the fabric of this Communion. I am preparing a series that will be offered later this spring for those who wish to learn more. Suffice it to say that some have a more traditional approach to the interpretation of Scripture and others a more progressive approach. The outcome of these differences is manifest in a number of ways, particularly in our understanding of inclusion as that pertains to women and to people who are gay and lesbian, the lightning-rod event being the consecration of Gene Robinson, a gay man with a life-long partner, as bishop of New Hampshire. So fiercely felt are these divides that a number of conservative bishops, particularly from the global south, have said that they cannot participate at Lambeth this summer, especially if Gene Robinson is to be present as a brother bishop.

After months of soul-searching and negotiation, two weeks ago Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams announced that “a substantial and meaningful” invitation to Gene Robinson would not be possible. “Bishop Robinson's participation would be limited to his being present in the Marketplace exhibit area”—which offer Bishop Robinson respectfully declined.

Since this announcement Bishop Robinson has fervently urged his colleagues here and abroad not to boycott Lambeth on his behalf—which many have threatened to do: “I want to say loud and clear—you must go!” said he. “You must find your voice. And somehow you have to find my voice and the voices of all the gay and lesbian people in your diocese who, for now, don't have a voice in this setting.” You must stay at the table. In recent weeks Bishop Robinson has reached out to the conservative bishops in this country saying that he has a better appreciation of their sense of isolation within our own House of Bishops. In his pain, he better sees and knows the pain others experience.

He has also said “It feels as if, instead of leaving the ninety-nine sheep in search of the one, the Archbishop of Canterbury has cut me out of the herd.” It makes me weep. Pray for our brother Gene and for this church.

There are those who say The Episcopal Church should just walk away. Our Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori, however, is determined to stay at the table—however fractured and messy the dinner party may be—and has said that painful as it is for us from the United States, it appears that our particular charisma is the burden of bringing an abiding inclusiveness to the Anglican Communion.

Lest we ourselves become judgmental, I suggest we look around and ask ourselves, who is not at this table? With whom are we not breaking bread? I know: the gates are open, the doors unlocked, the signs announce that all are welcome. More than that, we are ready, we are eager, we are gracious and hospitable. The bread is given freely. This is good. It is not enough. Because ***there is someone you know who does not know that she or he is welcome at this table.*** She or he may not know that in the breaking of the bread the risen Christ may be made known to them. Gene Robinson will have to wait for a future invitation. ***There is someone you know who would love to receive an invitation from you.***

At *50 Minutes* last Sunday, we learned from Dr. Paul Rajashekar that for many, many centuries ***the*** passage of scripture that guided the mission of the church was the parable Jesus told about a banquet (*Luke 14:15-24*): Someone gave a great dinner and invited lots of guests, sending out his messenger saying, ‘come, everything is ready.’ Many people gave excuses for why they couldn’t come; too busy, other plans, other priorities. So the host sent his messenger again: ‘Go out into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame; tell everyone to come so that my house may be filled.’

The crippled and the lame, the littlest of children, the bishops from the global south and the granite state, the friend or neighbor whom you know: each and every one of us is hungry for the love of God. I want Jesus too.

In a few minutes we will sing Hymn 306, with words written by George Wallace Briggs, whose words I close with:

Come, risen Lord, and deign to be our guest;
nay, let us be thy guests; the feast is thine;
thyself at thine own board make manifest
in thine own Sacrament of Bread and Wine.

One body, we, one Body who partake,
one Church united in communion blest;
one Name we bear, one Bread of life we break,
with all thy saints on earth and saints at rest.

One with each other, Lord, for one in thee,
who art one Savior and one living Head;
then open thou our eyes, that we may see;
be known to us in breaking of the Bread.

Amen.