

## **Breaking bread with a stranger**

Luke 24:13-35

April 30, 2017

When did they recognize Jesus? When he broke the bread. Before that, they didn't know who he was. He was a stranger to them.

This is a strange and wonderful account, unique to the gospel of Luke. Two people, identified as followers of Jesus, are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a village seven miles west. Presumably, they are returning home after spending Passover in Jerusalem, having witnessed there the terrifying and devastating events of the last several days. Their beloved Jesus, whom they regarded as a prophet and the savior of Israel, had been handed over to the Roman authorities by his own people, and crucified, and then, the confusing reports about a missing body.

Now they walk home, stunned, bewildered, grieving, these two followers of Jesus, one named Cleopas, the other unidentified. But it seems they live together in Emmaus, because when they reach the village at the end of the day, they invite their traveling companion to stay with them, so they may be husband and wife. Cleopas' unidentified companion may even be Mary, called in John's gospel, Mary the wife of Clopas, or in Matthew and Mark, Mary, the mother of James, or simply the "other Mary," one of those who had stood by as Jesus was crucified, one of those who had been among the first to discover the empty tomb.

They are joined on the road by Jesus, Cleopas and perhaps Mary, but they do not recognize him. How could they not recognize him? They know him well! This is the strange part of the story.

Was his appearance that much different from what it had been? Did they not recognize him because his face, his physical appearance, had changed?

Or did they not recognize him because of some kind of psychological block, some kind of post-traumatic stress? Could they not see him because they couldn't see, because their eyes refused to see what they could never imagine seeing?

Or did they not recognize him because Jesus himself was somehow preventing them from doing so? Because Jesus was intentionally cloaking himself in anonymity?

Who knows? We don't know. We can't know. It's a mystery. All the gospel says is that "somehow" they did not recognize him. How doesn't matter. What matters is that they didn't recognize him, that he was a stranger to them. And when they reached their village and this stranger made like he would continue on his way, they asked him to stay. They invited him home.

When did they recognize Jesus? When he broke the bread. And who supplied the bread? They did! They were the hosts of this meal. They offered bread to stranger and he took it and broke it and then they knew him and then he was gone.

This is a strange story, but wonderful. Wonderful because they recognized him. Wonderful because their beloved Jesus was not dead, but alive and with them. Wonderful because once they recognized him, it is clear that it was not he who had changed, but them.

They had been broken, defeated, sad, but already, already, the power of resurrection was at work in them. Already on the way! They didn't recognize it until after, but they said to each other: "Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road?"

There was a fire burning in them, the fire of life, the fire of the spirit of the living Jesus, the fire of the Spirit of the living God. The fire of life, the fire of love, the fire of generous, welcoming, self-giving love. It was when they offered bread to a stranger, a simple act of love, that they recognized him. Then they saw it was Jesus ...

When Steve and Liz Thorpe traveled south for the first time to Chinandega, a city of 130,000 people, less than ten miles inland from the west coast of Nicaragua, they went to meet strangers. When Liz Becker and Pete Blankenfeld and Lynne Ensworth and Maria Avino and Zoe Lennox and Japhy Holt and Kathleen Marsh went to Chinandega, they went to meet strangers.

They all went to meet strangers and to offer them shoeboxes, layette bags, bicycles, sewing machines -- their help, their hospitality, themselves. They went to offer "bread" to a stranger.

And whom did they meet? Whom did they find? When he took the gift from their hands, when he broke the "bread" they offered, did they recognize him? And who was it, do you think, received the blessing? Who was it, do you think, was changed?

I have asked each of those with us today who has been among the men and women and children of Chinandega to respond briefly to this question: How have the people of Chinandega changed you?

*Acudamos jubilosos a la cena del Señor*  
"Join together now, rejoicing at the banquet of the Lord"