

It seems like forever ago when Melissa d'Arabian gave me an uncorrected proof of her book, *Tasting Grace*. In truth, it was just a little over a year ago. It felt like such a privilege to read it and to follow the book's central thesis: that food is not an afterthought for God, but rather an invitation to grow into God's life-giving grace. You may know of Melissa from the Food Network or, like us, you may have 1 or 2 of her cookbooks. You may have met her here in worship, in a Bible study, or somewhere around town. You might be among those who've shared a meal with Melissa via Zoom. But if you've not met her, I want to show a short promotional for the book that I think will give you a flavor for Melissa (pardon the pun) and for her book... [Video Clip]

As I read the book, I sent Melissa several affirming emails and after I finished Melissa and I had a wonderful conversation about a potential sermon series related to the 'invitations' she identifies in the book; invitations God gives us thru food to deepen our connection with God, with one another, and even with ourselves.

And then, the pandemic! Which actually created an opportunity for a couple of things we are doing with this series. First, several of my colleagues are also doing series(es?) (is that the plural of series?) in their churches related to *Tasting Grace*, and so we've been gathering around a Zoom table to discuss ideas. Along with St. Paul's, UM churches in Palmdale, Chula Vista, Valencia, Encinitas, and Redondo Beach are also doing this series. (If you want to hear better sermons, check out those churches online!)

Second, Melissa will provide a video 'invitation' to practice the themes we'll be focusing on each week. I'll show the one for this theme as a wrap-up to the message, but be prepared to think on how you might RSVP to the invitation God is giving us with each theme we'll explore. (And if you want to get the book, Melissa and I are trying to figure out how she can sign it for you...)

Our focus as we begin is how food provides us an invitation to hospitality; to share God's gifts with others. Our scripture is Luke 24:13-35.

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This is such a beautiful story, isn't it? The story actually continues thru v. 49, but we'll be focusing on this first section, which tells us about two disciples walking away from Jerusalem on the 3rd day following Jesus' crucifixion. Neither of these two disciples are among Jesus' 12 disciples, so that's a good reminder that Jesus had more than just the 12

disciples who followed him into Jerusalem on the week of his arrest, trial, and execution.

But there are a couple of other things I'd like us to notice in about this text. The first is how intentional Luke is in telling this story, which is not actually in any other gospel. (Now, I suspect we sometimes assume the gospel writers just threw down the words on the page, but when we see the intentional way the stories are written, I think we begin to find deeper meanings than we might initially.)

So, here's the structure: v. 13 tells us of two disciples *going away* from Jerusalem. v. 14 tells us they are talking to each other. v. 15 tells us that a stranger, Jesus, comes near. Even so, verse 16 tells us that their eyes are *kept from recognizing* that the stranger is Jesus. Luke then packs a lot into vv. 17-30, but the pattern I just shared goes in an exact reverse beginning in v. 31. In v. 31, the eyes of these two disciples are opened and they recognize Jesus. Jesus then vanishes (as mysteriously as he appeared in v. 15). In v. 32 the disciples talk to each other and, in v. 33, they rush back to Jerusalem (7 miles away!)

So again, notice how intentionally Luke tells this story because that clues us in that the story is laden with connections, allusions, and meanings for Luke's audience; an audience which now includes us! The second thing to notice is that only one of the two disciples on the Emmaus road is named, which we should see as totally intentional! Many scholars suggest that while Cleopas is male, it's likely the unnamed disciple is a woman. This is because there are other times in Luke's gospel -- and also in other non-biblical writings during this period -- where women are left unnamed.

But as one scholar suggests: "Perhaps leaving a disciple unnamed is Luke's subtle rhetorical way of inviting us into the plot... Had both disciples been named, we readers would be observers more than potential participants in the story. An unnamed disciple provides an '[insert your name here]' moment for the reader." When combined with the possibility that this disciple is a woman, we can see how Luke is inviting both men and women to picture themselves as the *unnamed disciple* to whom Christ is drawing near!

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So, as we read, Jesus initially joins the two disciples on the road heading away from Jerusalem. He is, to them, an unrecognized stranger. (A friend of mine suggests he may've been hard to recognize underneath the mask he was wearing so as not to

spread germs!) This stranger has somehow missed out on the momentous events that just occurred in Jerusalem. The irony is: this 'stranger' – Jesus – is actually the only one who knows the full details of what's transpired over these last few days, right? And yet, even after explaining scripture to them, Jesus remains unrecognized. I think it's fascinating to think that the living and resurrected Word, Jesus, is teaching them about scripture, 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets', and still they don't recognize him. (This reminds me of a quote I saw recently, that we can get an 'A' in the Bible knowledge and still flunk Christianity.)

But back to the story! As they near their destination, Jesus 'acted as if he was going on ahead.' But then, the two disciples prevail upon the stranger, saying, "Stay with us. It is nearly evening, and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them." Note the transition. At this moment the stranger on the road becomes a guest, right? And so the hospitality that the disciples demonstrate when welcoming the stranger to walk alongside them, is now enlarged to encompass food and lodging.

As they sit at table, this stranger turned guest suddenly repeats a series of actions which these two disciples had just seen enacted during a Passover meal a few days earlier. So the stranger turned guest, now becomes the host, taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, and giving it to them. At this, their eyes are opened, and they recognize this stranger turned guest turned host is none other than the Jesus they'd been with for that Passover meal!

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Before moving further, let's remember that this was hardly the first time Jesus was in any of these roles; stranger, guest, host. First, we can name a number of times when Jesus interacted with foreigners or strangers. For example, he interacted with the Roman Centurion and the Samaritan woman at the well, just to name a couple. But we sometimes forget that he began his life as a stranger, a foreigner, the child in an immigrant family fleeing their homeland to cross the border into Egypt to avoid Herod's murderous intentions. That story is in Matthew 2:13-23.

This means that prior to their return to Nazareth, Jesus' early years were spent in a 'foreign' land where his ancestors had previously been enslaved! So Jesus being a stranger in Egypt links to the command in Deuteronomy 10:19, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." It is not difficult for me to imagine that the way Jesus interacted with foreigners, immigrants, and strangers

was based on his own experiences – both of welcome and hostility – in Egypt!

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We can also point multiples stories where Jesus was a guest. Like when he raised eyebrows by accepting the invitation to dine at the home of a hated tax collector, Zacchaeus in Luke 19, or when we spent time in Bethany at the home of Mary and Martha in Luke 10 and John 12, and when he was a guest for dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7. It seems to me that the reason Jesus acted as if he were going on ahead in v. 24 is to not presume that he will be invited to be a guest. And yet his disciples do what he has taught told them is important – welcoming the stranger -- in Matthew 25, as we explored a couple of weeks ago.

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It's also not difficult to think of the times where Jesus was a host. His home was full of guests when 4 men dropped their paralyzed friend thru the roof of Jesus home in Capernaum in Mark 2. There was also the famous night time visit to Jesus by Nicodemus in John 3. But we are more likely to recall how all the gospels share about Jesus hosting the miraculous feeding of the 5000 and as the host of the Lord's Supper!

Henry Brinton writes, "Each of these roles – stranger, guest, host -- provide guidance to Christians who want to do a better job of welcoming their neighbors into the life of the church, though the challenge of being hospitable is particularly daunting today, as congregations do ministry in a society that is generationally fractured, culturally diverse, and politically polarized." But as stranger, guest, and host Jesus reveals that he wants everyone to be welcome at his table. Which means we are invited to see hospitality as essential to our practice of faith.

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As Melissa writes, "We can all host even if cooking isn't our natural gift. In fact, we are told specifically by 1 Peter 4:9: "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." So, we can follow Jesus' example. He welcomed all – foreigners, strangers, people who were different from him – into his fold. We can take comfort in knowing that at any given moment, we are actually being hosted ourselves by God." Isn't his what happens in the Emmaus story? With this in mind, let's conclude by hearing Melissa's invitation for how we can taste the grace of offering hospitality this week. [Video Clip]