

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Dr. William Rich

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Luke 24:13-35

Blessed Breadmate

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 how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. (Luke 24:30-31, 35)

In the name of the God who graciously meets us, in mystery, in strangers, and feeds us. Amen.

On that first Easter evening, have you ever wondered what it was about the taking, blessing, and breaking of bread that revealed as Savior the one whom those two disciples had thought was nothing but a stranger? Was it something about how he said the words of blessing? *Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha'olam, haMotzi lechem min haaretz.* Blessed are you, Lord our God, King/Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.

Was it a special cadence to his voice as he spoke the words of blessing? Or his particularly powerful way of being present in and through the words, inhabiting the words with utter fullness of life, grace?

Or did he have a distinctive way of taking hold of the loaf, a way-all-his-own of breaking bread? Gently cradling the bread as if it were something living? Powerful in the way he tore it, with a clean and utterly focused pouring of himself into the bread he was breaking?

Or was it that when he broke the loaf, they suddenly noticed the wounds in his hands, and seeing those wounds, did they suddenly remember all that he had done for them since his Last Supper, all that he had been through, suffered, and yet survived, only to now be feeding them again – even though just minutes before, they had forgotten how to believe and hope in him, in bread, in life.

Who knows what it was. But somehow, some way, it was in the taking, and blessing, and breaking that they knew who he was. Their eyes were opened – and so were their hearts – to recognize that he was the one through whom God brings forth bread from the earth – and life from death – mysteriously and against all odds. This One, who had always been their Companion, they now recognized and knew once again as Companion, beloved breadmate.

Have you ever had a true companion? A breadmate? For that is what *companion** really means – a person with whom you delight to share bread. I hope all of us have had such a one in our lives.

Perhaps a relative. I think of my grandmother, who, when I was just a tyke, used to make me orange glaze cookies. She'd lift me up so I could sit on the edge of her kitchen table and watch her wrinkled hands kneading the dough, shaping the cookies. She would share a taste of the dough before they went into the oven, and give me the first cookie, from the first batch, right after it had cooled enough to be glazed and enjoyed.

Or perhaps your companion, the breadmate you think of, was first a stranger who then became a friend. I think of the first days of September in my sixth grade year. We had just

moved to Milwaukee, and I knew no one, not a soul. Everyone on the Cumberland School playground, everyone in class: was a stranger. Until Joe broke out of his circle of friends, walked up to me, and said, “Hi, your name is Bill? You’re new here, right? I’m Joe. How would you like to come to my house for dinner tonight?” And so began a three-year companionship. I think I ate dinner at Joe’s house, with his parents and three siblings, as often as I ate at my own. And at that table we became breadmates, friends, as we walked together the road of confusions and angsts, growth pangs, losses of innocent childhood, and the joyful springing up into new life at the cusp of manhood.

A grandmother. A stranger who became a friend. Whoever it may have been for you, like – Cleopas, and the unnamed other disciple – the two companions in today’s Gospel, I pray that each of us has been graced, at least once, to find a true companion, a true breadmate. Someone with whom to share our life stories – our sorrows and our joys – and with whom to find delight in breaking bread together, and beginning to glimpse that there was with us a mysterious Other, a third presence there with us. This barely visible Other was also listening intently to our stories, wanting to be let in on whatever we were sharing, talking about as we journeyed together along the road. This mysterious Other was there, wanting to break bread with us. This mysterious Other, ready to be discovered as the broken and risen Lord of life, right there with us, graciously revealing himself to us as we blessed, broke, and shared bread with one another. And mysteriously, but very surely, by Him being blessed, even when broken, and made ready to share our lives with Him, and with other strangers as well.

Sometimes the most startlingly powerful companion, the most beloved Breadmate, is the one who seems to come out of nowhere: the stranger. This one is surely from God, but at first not recognized by us for what he is: a visitor sent by the Holy One, blessed be God forever and ever. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 13:2) Breaking bread with angels. At table with the messengers of the divine. Without knowing it – at first.

And so it was for me. My most surprising companion, my most powerful breadmate was not my grandmother, not my best friend Joe, but an utter stranger – one whose name I never knew. It was during Thanksgiving week at Paul’s Place, the soup kitchen I helped found at a struggling parish in downtown Baltimore. As was true every day, that day the crowd was diverse, a mix of white and black, Latin and Asian – young and old – men and women – and children too –

After we had all eaten, it was clean up time – a young African-American man offered to help me clean up the kitchen, and take out the garbage.

We chatted casually as we wiped down tables, cleaned cutlery, scrubbed out stainless steel serving bowls, and gathered up into garbage bags the fragments of the meal we had all shared. I got to know him a bit, but he was shy, and seemed to want to know more about me than to share things about himself.

As he and I carried the garbage bags down the fire escape, and out into the alley behind the church, he said to me, “Father, I loved the food today. But you know, y’all serve something even better than food up there, pointing up the fire escape to the kitchen. You serve peace. Peace and love.”

Now it was my turn to be reticent, even tongue-tied. I was so moved by this young man's words that I hardly knew what to say. So I took my time putting my garbage bags into one of the barrels, so as to give myself a chance to shape a reply. But when I turned around to thank him for his warm words, he was gone. I looked down the alley. I looked out into Washington Blvd. He was nowhere to be seen. An angel? Jesus? Who knows? All I know is that whoever he was, through this stranger in the alley, I experienced something very like what I imagine the disciples in Emmaus experienced. Through that young black man that day, I can honestly say that the Lord was "made known to me in the breaking of the bread."

My prayer for you this day, and in these days when many of us have a bit more time to savor the breaking of bread, is that you will notice – in the blessing of the bread – in remembering the growing grain that died and fell into the earth so as to give birth to it, its willingness to being crushed, its giving itself to be mixed with that mysterious substance which causes it to rise, and in its life giving, soul-satisfying, divinity-delivering deliciousness – remember in all this that the Lord is as close at hand as that bread, and as close at hand as the one with whom you share it, whether that breadmate be human and embodied or the mysterious Holy Spirit.

And remember that your holy Companion, your blessed Breadmate, is ready to mix the mystery of resurrection with all that is crushed in your life and the life of our world, transforming it into the true bread from heaven, the bread of life, love in your hands and on your tongue.

Amen.

- *companion, from two Latin words: cum (with) + panis (bread)*