

**St Lucas, April 14-15, 2018**

**Sermon**

There's a short story published in 1988 by Raymond Carver called *A Small Good Thing*.<sup>1</sup> The story begins with a mother going to a local bakery and ordering a birthday cake for her son, Scotty. However, when the child's birthday arrives, he is struck by a car walking home from school, so he ends up in the hospital where his parents wait for days to see if their son will ever awaken from a coma. In the meantime, they begin receiving strange and taunting phone calls from an unknown caller saying things like, "Have you forgotten about Scotty?" Well, three days after the incident, Scotty succumbs to his injuries and dies. After they return home they receive another call, and Scotty's mom, Anne, figures out who it is. So in the middle of the night, they go to the bakery to confront the baker who had baked Scotty's cake, which they had naturally forgotten about. Their interaction begins with a lot of tension, as the baker vents frustration over them leaving the cake hanging for 3 days, and Scotty's parents venting frustration over the phone calls. The baker is even fearful of a physical altercation. But then Anne reveals that her son is dead, and everything changes. The baker begs their forgiveness, and makes room for them at a work table. He pours them coffee, and gives them fresh cinnamon rolls saying, "You probably need to eat something. I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small good thing at a time like this" As he watched them eat he says, "There's more. Eat up. Eat all you want. There's all the rolls in the world here." Then he shares with them his own story of loneliness and isolation. And finally, he breaks open a loaf of dark, rich bread that tastes of molasses and coarse grain. The three of them talk until dawn, sharing their lives with one another, and the couple never even think of leaving.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Carver, *A Small Good Thing from Where I'm Calling From: Selected Stories* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998).

It's an unexpected thing in this story that these strangers who were both hurting in their own ways and were so angry at one another would find healing and companionship with one another breaking bread and speaking freely to each other about their hardships, pain, and grief. The couple are suddenly joined on their journey by another broken soul who is willing to walk with them and they with him, and something redemptive occurs, and they don't even want to part company.

Something about the Road to Emmaus story brought this short story immediately to mind. Like the 2 disciples, these two parents are on a new journey of what I'd call bewildered grief. A stranger enters their midst suddenly, and they share their story with the stranger. The stranger then shares with them. They don't want to part and end up around the table together, where the abundance and hospitality of God's love is made manifest. It's perhaps close to a modern retelling of the Biblical story that helps us to see how we ourselves live out the text in our lives.

I'd imagine that many of us at one time or another have been in the state of bewildered grief that both the parents in the story and the disciples on the road find themselves in. This is grief that is accompanied by a shock of sorts; a state of wondering how whatever happened happened and trying to make sense of everything. The parents naturally are in this state from the sudden loss of their child on a day they expected to be celebrating his birth. The disciples are in this state on the road as they discuss everything that had been going on. On one hand, the prophet of God in whom they'd placed their hopes for freedom had been killed by the powers of their day. On the other, they've been told the tomb was empty and the women who'd visited the tomb in the morning had been told Jesus of Nazareth was alive. So their grief at the death of a friend, leader, and the one they believed was the Messiah is joined by the confusion of the women's report, which no doubt leaves them asking the questions of 'How can this be?' and 'I don't know what to think or what to believe.'

I'd like you to think for a moment, have you ever found yourself in that state of bewildered grief? Maybe it wasn't as extreme as the losses in the story or that of the disciples; maybe your grief wasn't caused by a death but a lost or broken relationship or other forms of loss we experience. Whatever the situation that comes to your mind, think about what got you through it. What was it? I'd wager it was the love of others expressed through small good things like listening ears, cups of coffee, and shared meals. The baker offered such to the grieving couple in the story; Jesus, in the form of a stranger, meets the disciples on the road and offers such to them; and we have received such comfort from others and it has helped us keep moving, and restored our hope.

Or perhaps you've occupied the role of the baker, or the risen Christ. You see Christ accompanies us through all things when we accompany each other through all things, sharing our lives fully with each other, helping one another continue our journeys together, and sharing small good things in moments of deep grief and anguish, as well as joyful and easy times. Maybe you've offered the listening ear, some sage advice, or a meal, maybe even taking one of our frozen meals to someone. This is what we do. We are a people whose very identity is wrapped up in breaking bread together. In the Emmaus text, Jesus becomes known in the breaking of the bread, it is the big reveal of the story, and now we break bread to remember that we carry on his ministry as the Body of Christ. We act as the hands and feet of Christ to accompany one another lovingly. We act as the hands and feet of Christ to accompany strangers lovingly.

Through us, strangers to us may experience the love of God, and Christ also meets us on our journeys in strangers; people who may even be other to us. This happens when we practice hospitality in its fullness. Hospitality isn't only giving to others, but it is also receiving. It's reciprocal in nature. It's seen in the story when the couple and the baker share their lives, swapping the deepest of stories with one another, in the hospitably open table of abundance the baker offered. It's seen in the Road to Emmaus text in many ways.

The disciples find their journey disrupted by a stranger. And even though they seem annoyed, maybe at having to tell the story one more time to someone else who is asking, they do tell the story. In an act of hospitality, they share their experience with this concerned stranger. Then, in turn, the stranger offers an act of hospitality in telling them the truth of what is going on, his own story. And though the stranger starts to go on his way, the disciples, who don't want to part with this stranger, open their home to him, and apparently provide a meal. Then, in the last turn, the stranger offers one last act of hospitality when he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. It is through such reciprocal hospitality that the very presence of God in our midst comes to be recognized, even if only glimpsed for a moment.

On my own most recent journey, the All-In Tour I did in March, I had such an experience. The first day of the tour was in Nashville, and the first show of the day was at a place called Pova, which is short for Poverty and the Arts.<sup>2</sup> Pova is an artist collective for homeless artists. It is based in a home, and the organization provides artists with materials, space to create their art, and means by which to sell their art and earn an income. Additionally, being a house, they have a kitchen the artists are welcome to use, and they store food there that they share with one another freely. The director, Nicole, also works to help connect the artists with any resources that maybe helpful to them, and helps them navigate systems. The day I happened to be there was a beautiful day, and the home in which they are based has a porch, so we gathered on the porch. We shared food together, and then I played for them. Between songs we shared our lives with one another, and with a lot of humor. We laughed together a great deal. But after I got done and began saying goodbyes as I had another show at a local church that evening, I was invited by an artist to view her work; an invitation I was grateful to accept. Much to my surprise, she was the artist that created a painting that had caught my eye the second I stepped in the place. It was a beautiful painting of a sunset with quotes that read, "He merges night into day and day into

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about Pova, and to view artwork from Pova artists, visit [www.povertyandthearts.org](http://www.povertyandthearts.org)

night; and he has subjected the sun and the moon to his law; each one runs its course for a term appointed. Such is God your Lord; to Him belongs all dominion. And those you invoke beside him have not the least of power.” It’s a beautiful quote that speaks of God’s glory visible in creation. It sounds like a psalm. In truth it is from the Quran. As she showed me her art, I learned that she seeks to share the peace and beauty of her Muslim faith through her art to share with the public the true nature of Islam, which runs counter to what folks are often told about the nature of Islam. And it occurred to me that we were after the same thing: using art to break down barriers and build community. It was a remarkable moment of reciprocal hospitality in which I shared my art and parts of my story with them, and with this woman, and then she shared her art and parts of herself with me. In such instances of hospitality there is something special that happens; some unique connection, and perhaps it can only be described as the presence of God’s love. The extravagant hospitality that is the free sharing and receiving of the gifts of everything we have to offer to one another truly brings something divine into our world. Whether we share our gifts and receive the gifts of beloved family and friends we’ve known a long time, or whether we share our gifts with, and receive the gifts of, strangers, perhaps folks who believe differently than us, live differently than us, love differently than us, look differently than us, or come from other places, these acts of hospitality grounded in love bring the presence of God into our midst; they set our hearts aflame; they bring hope, healing, wholeness, a sense of true accompaniment and community, and small good things that keep one another moving forward.

Molly Marshall writes, “Actions more than words, welcome more than self-protection, provides the space where others might fearlessly enter and find themselves at home. Sharing the common meal transgresses boundaries and allows communion with Christ, who meets us whenever we gather at the Lord’s Table—or at the tables that provide self-giving welcome...

Christ joins himself to those on the way, who then make space for him in the village. God always creates space for the “other” in order that true community might be formed.”<sup>3</sup>

May the living Christ be recognized in our actions of hospitality, giving and receiving the gifts of God freely to one another and to strangers in the hardest of times and the best of times. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Bartlett, David L.; Barbara Brown Bartlett. Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide (Feasting on the Word: Year A volume) (Kindle Locations 15224-15225). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.