

“Jesus’ Final Question”

Luke 24: 26-48

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I count myself as a member of the ever-growing population of people that considers themselves a foodie. Pair that with my love of travel and I have had some pretty amazing cuisine around the world. I've had crepes in Paris, pretzels in Munich, bison burgers in Wyoming, and grits in Georgia, but the most amazing food I've ever tried was not a dish that is internationally renowned, was not one that you will find five stars next to in your travel guide, and it was not even one that I intentionally sought out. The best food I have ever eaten was the rice pudding served at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India. Before that, I didn't even like rice pudding, but now, 11 years later, I can still taste that rice pudding. It was delicious, but I think a large part of what made it taste so good was eating *in* the Golden Temple and the way that it was served to me.

The Golden Temple is a four hundred year old Sikh Temple in Northern India and it is the biggest place of pilgrimage for Sikhs around the world. It is officially called the Harmandir Sahib but is better known as the Golden Temple because the gurdwara, the building where worship occurs each day, is made of white marble that is covered with gold leaf. The gurdwara is surrounded by a large pool of water, which reflects the gold walls in all directions. It is gorgeous, and the architecture alone is a reason to make a pilgrimage there. There are other buildings at the temple, and the most popular one is the langar, or the kitchen. This kitchen is open to anyone who comes to the Golden Temple and they almost always serve the same menu every day: daal lentils, naan flat bread, a vegetable dish, and that delicious rice pudding.

When you first arrive at the kitchen, you walk through a line and pick up a tray, a cup, and a fork. Then, you are seated, still in line, on the floor. Servers walk through the lines offering generous

portions from that days menu to each of the guests. You can take your time eating, maybe starting a conversation with the person next to you or across, and when you are done you stand up, deposit your dishes in a large tub, and walk out. There is no cost to the customer and everyone who serves you offers kind smiles and gentle words. It is a very orderly, regimented process and it has to be, because the Golden Temple serves on average about 10,000 meals each day. When there is a special event at the Temple, they can serve up to 100,000 meals out of that one kitchen.

This unique dining experience is an important part of the Sikh religion. At this meal, also served on smaller scales in Sikh temples around the world, everyone is offered the same food and the same service, seated side by side. It started as a way to unite all people regardless of their caste, their job, their gender, or their age and now brings together people of different ethnicities, nationalities, and even religions. Sikhs strive to live out the idea that we are all created equal in the eyes of God, and demonstrate this through a simple meal, available to anyone who is hungry. At the Golden Temple, they don't let the numbers of visitors overwhelm them and they don't worry about the logistics so much that it prevents them from preparing the meal—they just focus on living out their beliefs each day in a very public and very meaningful demonstration of their hospitality and love for God.

This idea of bringing people together over a meal in order to experience God's love is a common theme across many of the world's religions. The fact that it is so important to so many different people reinforces for me that breaking bread with a neighbor or even with a stranger is a part of being a faithful person, whatever that faith may be. For me, when I visited the Golden Temple and ate their food, I was enjoying more than the rice pudding—I was learning something deeply true and beautiful about the Sikh religion and about the people who follow it, and it made me want to go out and treat others the same caring way that I had been treated.

I have seen this same emphasis on the power of sharing a meal in our own Christian faith. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is sitting down at meals or inviting people to eat with him. It is over food that barriers are broken down and outsiders are first welcomed in. The importance of food is

emphasized in today's reading from Luke—it is the last question that Jesus asks the disciples.

Jesus appears to the disciples and they are scared, confused, and uncertain. He soothes them, demonstrating that it is really him, Jesus, in the flesh, and when he is done with his demonstration he asks them, “Have you anything here to eat?” Of all the questions that Jesus could have left for his all important last question, he asks the same question that every teenager, head already in the refrigerator, has been asking since the beginning of time.

I can imagine the disciples being exasperated by this turn of conversation. They had real questions and real confusion about what and who they were seeing, and Jesus is almost casual in his request. “Got anything to eat?” I can almost see him with his eyes roaming the room, looking for a basket of bread or a bowl of fruit. What he receives is fish, and it is only in him eating it that the disciples finally believe what they are seeing and are satisfied that Jesus has truly been resurrected. Jesus pausing to eat acts as a bridge in the disciple's story. It is only through Jesus eating that the disciples are able to transition from the experience of resurrection to receiving the instructions from Jesus that will lead them into the next phase of their ministry and their lives as they go out and make more disciples. Jesus is the one eating, but in a way, the disciples are fed as they watch him eat, suddenly able to make sense of his presence and gaining the confidence that they need to carry out their ministry

Eating is Jesus' last request and it is a reminder to us all that when we feed someone else, we are also feeding ourselves. It is a lesson that when we take what we have and invite others to eat it, we are doing God's work. Jesus' final question and act of eating with the disciples is our example that table fellowship, breaking bread, sharing a meal, whatever you want to call it—is not only an important part of our lives, but it is living out God's work in the world—feeding others the way we ourselves have been fed.

We symbolically act this out each month when we share in the bread and wine of communion together, but it does not end there. When we have potlucks or bring refreshments for meetings, we are

doing this work of discipleship. When we spend a day on the Habitat work site and then return to church to eat dinner with our workmates, or when we volunteer at a soup kitchen and then sit down and share the same meal with those you just served, you are a living representation of God's love and hospitality. Food fills more than our bellies—it makes us feel welcome, it comforts us, it heals old wounds, and it builds relationships. Jesus' question to the disciples was about a lot more than just satisfying his appetite, it is a question he asks each one of us, “Do you have anything here to eat? Are you ready to feed people? With what food are you going to feed others?” There is an invitation for all of us to be ready to feed someone who might be in need of a nourishing meal.

In our church, food is one of the threads that weaves through the life of our congregation. It appears in a lot of places, whether it is people who are concerned about access to sustainable, local fresh food or our youth sitting down to eat dinner together every week at Wednesday School. IN addition to these ongoing ministries, this spring there is a new opportunity to gather together over food and good company with the formation of Salt Groups.

A Salt Group is made up of eight people who commit to coming together about once a month over the course of a year. Groups are assigned and will be mixed up combinations of individuals and couples, retirees and young adults, all genders, South Church members, South Church friends, and South Church visitors, all different backgrounds and experiences. You might not know anyone in your group of eight when you begin, but by the end the hope is that you will have a deeper connection with at least a few other people in the church.

The only agenda is to get to know one another, and this will most often be done by, of course, sharing a meal together. It is supposed to be simple and welcoming. There is an opportunity for any group member who would like to be the host. When you host you can request a potluck or you can declare that the menu will only have dessert or that you will be gathering for a picnic in the park. What you eat or how you eat doesn't matter, but as we have seen in our Gospel story today, and what I experienced in my visit to the Golden Temple, is that when you are offered an opportunity to sit down,

be welcomed, and be served, something as simple as rice pudding can become the best meal you've ever tasted in your life. It only takes a meal and a little hospitality to having a transforming effect on our lives.

I imagine that Salt Groups will live up to their names—bringing out the uniqueness of individuals, bringing together different people, and making the life of anyone who participates a little more flavorful. It's a big mandate for a simple idea, but I think we can pull it off. I think Salt Groups have the power to strengthen our community and help us live out our faith. Whenever people come together over food and conversation, good things start to happen. Lives begin to change. I believe in the transformative power of good food, and I believe that if we only ask each other one question this year at South Church, we should be asking each other, “Have you anything here to eat?”