

Be Known to Us in Breaking Bread

Luke 24:13-35

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Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

It has been a while since I have seen one of those news stories, but I am sure you will remember them:

Rosalie Dawson found the image of Jesus on a sour cream and onion potato chip.

Dan and Sarah Bell found a Jesus-shaped Cheeto, reaching out to bless them. I like that one, actually.

Fred Whan saw the face of Christ on his slightly burned fish stick.

Marilyn Smith found Jesus and Mary in the pattern on her pancake.

Donna Lee recognized the face of Jesus on a pierogi. She sold it on eBay for \$1775.

You can see pictures of these miraculous bits of food on your bulletin insert. These stories crop up from time to time, and my question is always, “How did they know?” How did they know that this is what Jesus looked like? How are they so sure that this particular blurry image looks like Jesus of Nazareth?

I am going to guess that these people saw something that resembled the pictures on their childhood Sunday School walls or in their children’s Bible – long-ago images that had seeped deep into their consciousness, providing a template against which they measure everything they see throughout their lives. “Look, Bob, this potato chip looks just like Jesus!” “Honey, come here! The pattern on my pancake is definitely Jesus and Mary!”

But we don’t know what Jesus looked like, of course. The pictures we all grew up with were just artists’ imaginings about him. But those images stay with us for a very long time, and they wield great power over our imaginations. This tells me that we need to take great care about the images we show our kids, don’t you think? We don’t really know what Jesus looked like. We can only imagine.

But I want to return for just a moment to the Cheeto that looks like Jesus. I said that I like this one. That is because it doesn’t purport to show Jesus’ face. Instead, it shows his actions – reaching out to bless his listeners, perhaps, or to still the storm that threatens to engulf us. Jesus reaching out toward us. I can recognize him in those actions, so when I look at this Cheeto, if I tilt my head just a little to the left and squint just right, I can imagine that this is an image of Jesus himself.

We can only imagine what Jesus looked like, but we know what he did. Jesus healed people, body and soul. He walked on water. He walked along dusty roads, too, followed by a few people, or by a crowd. He surrounded himself with outcasts – scruffy people, corrupt tax collectors, women of ill repute, people who had a lot to apologize for, according to the town gossips. And we know for sure that Jesus fed people. He broke bread with his disciples, with religious leaders, and with great crowds of hungry people. I wonder, during Jesus’ ministry, how many people watched his hands as he broke the bread? How many people heard him say the traditional prayers over bread and wine? How many people knew that intimate moment, when this dusty, charismatic, itinerant healer and teacher looked them in the eye and gave them bread? How many people were nourished by him over the years.

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Today's scripture is set on Easter afternoon. We meet two people who were in Jesus' outer circle – not two of the eleven remaining disciples, but people in the next ring of Jesus' followers. Carol Asher calls them "tagalongs." These two are walking from Jerusalem down the short road to the village of Emmaus, where they live. They are talking over everything that has happened in the last few days – Jesus' trial, the Crucifixion, the tortured death, and then the inexplicable empty tomb. And suddenly, Jesus himself is walking with them, and talking with them, and explaining everything to them, but they don't recognize him. They are so caught up in their own walk, their own confusion, their own grief, that they miss his presence on their journey.

At last, these two friends and this odd stranger arrive at Emmaus, their destination, and the two invite Jesus in to dinner. It's the least they can do. Hospitality requires it, after all. And they don't want the conversation to end. And so, the meal is prepared and the table set, and Jesus changes from stranger to host. JESUS is the one who blesses the bread. JESUS is the one who breaks it. And something in that moment, something in the way his hands hold the bread, something in the sound of his voice as he says the traditional prayers, tells these two tagalongs, that the stranger is no stranger at all. This is the risen Christ.

And just like that, in the blink of an eye, in the moment of recognition, Jesus is gone.

Even though it is evening already, past dinnertime, the two tagalongs jump up from the table and run all the way back to Jerusalem. They find the disciples, and – all excited and out of breath – they tell what has happened to them, about the stranger on the walk, about his explanations for everything that had happened, about the meal, and finally, that they had recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

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I sometimes hear preachers ask, "If Jesus appeared on earth today, would you recognize him?" I can tell you that we wouldn't recognize his face. But we would know him by what he did. He would sit with people who have little, or nothing at all. He would bring water to thirsty souls. He would go to the Belknap County Jail and visit the inmates there. He would welcome the stranger, the outcast, the migrant. And for sure, he would sit at table with hungry souls, offering the traditional prayers of thanks and blessing, and breaking the bread for all to eat.

Jesus IS present in Center Harbor this morning. He is here in this room and ready to feed us. When bread is broken, may we always be able to see our risen Lord.

Amen