

When I did my chaplaincy training the summer after my first semester in seminary, I listened to a lot of stories. There's a kind of hunger in our human need to tell particular stories. Stories that try to make sense of a tragedy, stories that say who we are, stories that tell one thing in the place of another we can't put to words just yet. There is a hunger to tell our story and to be heard.

It just takes me a few seconds of remembering and I am back on the fourth floor of Genesis East in Davenport, listening to stories:

A rare story of survival from the sinking of the Indianapolis in the Pacific toward the end of World War II.

Or hearing of powerful experiences of earlier healings from a woman who hoped to come through open heart surgery at the age of 88—and she did—with flying colors.

Or stories of a husband and father of eight and his sense of humor over a rich and full life as he decided not to take any more dialysis treatments. I remember some of those stories made me laugh out loud—even as I watched the eight children come to terms with their father's decision, each in their own way.

I remember one very reserved man, who had recently lost his wife, breaking down while he told me about losing a much loved dog several years earlier.

In our hunger to make sense of our lives, we craft our stories and we tell them, over and over, to whichever willing ear comes our way. And it is in the telling and the hearing of these stories that we begin to be fed.

Cleopas and his buddy were in that process of sharing a story as they walked the road to Emmaus. Telling the stories of the last several days, hoping in the telling to sort through what they had seen and heard. Hungry to find some kind of solace, some kind of reason, something that would make sense of what, in these past days, has seemed so nonsensical. They had a particular hunger that evening, there on the road to Emmaus.

And as they walked along Jesus joined them, although they didn't know him. And this apparent stranger was another ear to hear the story—another person they could tell about Jesus the Nazorean, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. Jesus' first act to satisfy the hunger of these two men was to listen to their story.

Then, like the good teacher that he was, he fleshed out their story. He put muscle, skin and tendons on the bones of their story, giving it history, giving it purpose, giving it meaning, putting it in the context of God's love and promise to God's people beginning with Moses and all the prophets. Jesus took their personal story and put it in the context of God's larger story.

Then as they arrive at their destination and invite this stranger in to eat with them, he meets their hunger in a very real and concrete way—at the table—the place, ultimately where all the hungry truly come. At the table, with the bread, taken, blessed, broken and given.

Taken, blessed broken and give, a series of actions that Luke has described before. Most recently at that last supper—as the twelve came together with Jesus to mark the Passover. And when 5,000 men and their families were hungry and needed to be fed.

Each time Luke uses the same language, bread taken, blessed, broken and given.

And in that taking and blessing, breaking and giving, Jesus is revealed, to the 5,000 as one in whom the power of God is pleased to dwell, then to the twelve as one in whom the promise given to those enslaved Israelites long ago has been enfleshed and made human, and finally to these two hungry men joining him at table in Emmaus. Jesus is revealed as the risen Christ, the one over whom death has no power and through whom all God's people are given new life.

In that moment Jesus is revealed and their every hunger is satisfied. And having recognized Jesus in the meal, the two realize that that indeed their hearts and minds had been opened to hear the word, even though in the moment they did not know it. Through Jesus revealed in the meal, they are empowered to know him in the word.

On that road to Emmaus these men were able to tell their story and be heard, then they found their story put into a larger story that gave it purpose and meaning, that placed it within God's story for the world, and finally they experienced God's love made real in Jesus, as he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. At the table, these two hungry men came, and they were fed. And through the meal they were empowered to understand Jesus' teaching.

We too are hungry. Hungry in so many ways. We hunger to be heard, to tell our story, to make sense of our lives. Whether its sharing the story of a moment that came to define us, or telling of a series of moments over a whole life that say who we are, or telling a story that carries a future hope, or a story that hides a past difficulty we're not ready to tell. We want to tell our stories and we want to be heard.

And then we hunger to understand our own stories in the context of God's larger story. What does this particular thing that has happened to me have to do with what God's intends for me? Have to do with how God is calling me?

What does it mean that I lost that job? That my spouse is sick? That my child is struggling? What does it mean that my friend won't talk to me, that my past continues to define me, that each cloudy day is another day that feels hopeless to me?

What do all these things mean? How is God speaking to me through these things?

And finally, we hunger to truly experience God. We want to know God. We want to encounter God. We want to jumpstart our faith. We hunger to meet God.

The reason that this story of Cleopas and his buddy on the road to Emmaus resonates so much is because it is our story too. It tells of our hungers, and it shows how Jesus hears our stories, gives them meaning in the context of God's story for the world and finally how Jesus meets us in the meal.

Jesus hears us as he walks with us and listens to our story. We may not recognize Jesus, he may look like a best friend, or a spouse, or a parent—or even a perfect stranger. He may sound like your sister who calls on just the right day, or a colleague who offers to get you a cup of coffee. Jesus walks with us in our prayers, or when we write in a journal, or when we share with a small group of trusted friends. Jesus hears us because Jesus walks with us. Like he walked with the two on the road to Emmaus, and heard their story—even though they didn't recognize him, even though they thought him a perfect stranger.

And Jesus puts our story into a larger story—into God's story. In that larger story we can make sense of our own stories. We experience God's story narrated through

scripture, through the word, read and proclaimed in worship, through study and as we pray and use the bible in our devotions. God comes to us in scripture and we find, like the two on the road to Emmaus, that our hearts burn within us when we truly hear God speaking to us through the word.

When we dig into the bible, learning it, searching it's meanings, experiencing it in different ways and different times, we can come to understand how our personal stories fit into this larger story of God promise to us, God's love for us and God's call that seeks us and sends us into the world. Through God's word we find meaning. Through God's word, God speaks to us.

And finally, it's at the table that we encounter Jesus. It's through the bread, taken, blessed, broken and given—to us—that we meet the risen Christ and our eyes are opened and we know him. It's at the table that we find the strength to understand the ways that God has been listening to us and calling us. It's in the bread and wine, what Martin Luther called “pure, unutterable love” that each week we are nourished and our deepest hungers are fulfilled.

But even as our hunger is met we need to remember those who truly hunger. Because when you are really hungry because you haven't eaten, or you are trying to get by on one meal a day, or the US equivalent food stamp allowance of \$21 a week, you don't have the energy to face spiritual hungers that might pull at your heart.

As we meet here and are fed, we need to remember those who still hunger. I heard at a conference in the Fall, “If our neighbor's pain does not have voice in our gathering, it is something other than Eucharist.” Eucharist, from the Greek for Thanksgiving. If in our

celebration of the meal, in our encounter with the risen Christ, we do not find ourselves called to remember our brothers and sisters who still hunger, then our encounter is cut short and our thanksgiving rings hollow.

The meal we share here should call us to reach out to others. To those who still hunger. Both to those who don't have enough, and to those who haven't felt welcome at the table. The meal we share should call us to help those missing meals. The meal we share here should bring us shoulder to shoulder with all of God's people, not just with the people who look and act like us. The meal we share here should call us to act for the sake of the least, for our 21<sup>st</sup> century version of those who Jesus ate with--sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. What would our 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Christ-like fellowship look like? Who would those people be? Who doesn't have a place at the table? Who thinks they might not be welcome here?

Well, our third graders have given us a start here as they all us to remember that people right here in our town are hungry. And while we respond to their call, I hope we can keep seeking out others who need to be heard, who need to be understood and who need to be fed.