

TASTE AND SEE: The Bread that Gives Life to the Poor

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Last Sunday, Father Richard talked about his recent experience, standing at a railway station in Japan, of being in what he called a *liminal* space, one that is neither here nor there, but, as it were, a place of transition between one situation and the next. It is a space we have all found ourselves in at some point—often, as he did, while traveling. You've left one place behind and you're not in the next one yet, so there's a kind of isolation about it, even a loneliness, but also a strange sort of freedom that allows room for the expanding and deepening of the self (these are my words, Richard, not yours), all of which can lead us into a place where God is very close.

Because I was intrigued with the concept of the *liminal* as Richard described it, I looked it up and discovered that this transitional state exists in a middle place between two others: the pre-liminal on one side and what the authors of the concept have called *communitas*, defined as an unstructured community where all members are equal.

That last part resounded somewhere deep inside of me, because for the past several weeks, I have been immersed in a book—this book, which I recommend to you highly. It's called TAKE THIS BREAD, by Sara Miles, and although the story it tells includes at its center a profoundly *liminal* moment, it takes place, for the most part, in the space on the far side of that threshold, moving *through* that place of emptiness, that sense of marginality and separateness, into a place of living, breathing community. It's a story that begins with a piece of bread freely offered and ends in the feeding of the hungry with real bread--and rice, and pasta, and fresh fruit and vegetables and the often messy, imperfect, but life-giving *reality* of human connection.

Raised as an atheist by her parents, Sara Miles had lived a secular life as a restaurant coo, in a typically hot, crowded Manhattan kitchen, surrounded by colorful—and very profane--co-workers; then as a journalist covering wars and insurrections in Central America; and, eventually, as a divorced mother with a female partner, living in the Mission District of San Francisco. In the decade before the book opens, she has been in a very mixed-up place, searching for meaning and finding it in ideological commitment and—well, mostly, as she looks back on it, in *food*. She describes significant moments in dangerous or poor neighborhoods, where time and again, her faith in humanity is renewed by the giving and receiving of nourishment--for instance, a stale cookie from a Jesuit priest or, in the barrios of El Salvador, a jar of warm milk, fresh from the cow.

Then, early one morning, years later and back in this country, she wanders into a church, eats a piece of bread and is radically transformed. She is... well, I'll let her you, herself:

“Early one winter morning,” she writes, “when Katie [her daughter] was sleeping at her father’s house, I walked into St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in San Francisco. I had no earthly reason to be there. I’d never heard a Gospel reading, never said the Lord’s Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian—or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut. But on other long walks, I’d passed the beautiful wooden building, with its shingled steeples and plain windows, and this time I went in, on an impulse, with no more than a reporter’s habitual curiosity.

“The rotunda was flooded with slanted morning light. A table in the center of the open, empty space was ringed high above by a huge neo-Byzantine mural of unlikely saint figures with gold halos, dancing; outside, in the back, water trickled from a huge slab of rock set against the hillside. Past the rotunda, and a forest of standing silver crosses, there was a spare, spacious area with chairs instead of pews, where about twenty people were sitting....”

She walks in, takes a chair, trying not to look conspicuous; notes a man and woman in long, tie-dyed robes chanting in harmony, and more or less does what everybody else is doing: standing up, sitting down, waiting, listening, standing up, sitting down again. It occurs to her that it’s all kind of *ridiculous*, though peaceful and interesting.

Then a woman announces, “Jesus invites everyone to his table,” and Sara starts moving with the others towards the big table in the rotunda, which has on it some dishes and a pottery goblet.

She continues: “And then we gathered around that table. And there was more singing and standing, and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying, “the body of Christ”, and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying, “the blood of Christ.” And then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.”

She finds herself absolutely knocked over by the experience--literally, physically unbalanced. She’s in tears. On the way home afterwards, she struggles for some kind of explanation: maybe she was hyper-suggestible; maybe her tears were a kind of pent-up sadness about everything that had happened in the last decade of her life.

“Yet,” she declares, “that impossible word, *Jesus*, lodged in me like a crumb. I said it over and over to myself, as if repetition would help me understand. I had no idea what it meant; I didn’t know what to do with it. But it was realer than any thought of mine, or even any subjective emotion: It was as real as the actual taste of the bread and the wine. And the word was indisputably in my body now....”

“I couldn’t reconcile the experience with anything I knew or had been told. But neither could I go away: For some inexplicable reason, *I wanted that bread again.*”

The rest of the story is about her passionate determination that this bread that she’s received—both physically and in her spiritual self—be shared abroad with whoever needs it, whoever is hungry. She reads everything she can get her hands on about the history and theology of Christianity, trying to catch up. She enters fully into the life of the congregation, even becoming a sort of lay deacon herself. But always, restlessly, she is motivated by that memory of the bread that fed her, and even though she continues to move forward in faith, she finds the path more difficult. “It wasn’t about abstract theological debates....,” she writes, “It was about action. *Taste and see*, the Bible said, and I did. I was tasting a connection between communion and food—between my burgeoning religion and my real life.”

Gradually (but relentlessly! she’s very strong-willed) she and a few other volunteers work on the idea of opening a weekly food pantry at St. Gregory’s, getting the staples from the San Francisco Food Bank and the fresh fruit and vegetables from the overflow of supermarkets and offering it to whoever wants it, whoever shows up: no forms to fill out, no questions asked.

They set the groceries out on colorful cloths on tables set up around the beautiful altar--and on the altar itself, lettered with the words of a 7th century mystic:

*“Did not our Lord share his table with tax collectors and harlots?
So do not distinguish between worthy and unworthy. All must be equal for you to serve.”*

So on that first day, the doors are opened. The people come in—and what people they are: the poor, the hungry, the single mothers, the men out of work, the grandmothers who speak no English; the weirdos, the marginalized, the mentally ill, the smelly, the loud, the surprisingly intelligent and educated—all served, all welcome, just as they are.

The rest is history: hundreds today being served each week, with satellite pantries all over town.

It isn’t perfect, this unfolding reality. Not everyone at St. Gregory’s is on board all the time. Because the building itself—built only 12 years ago--is so special and so beautiful (if you’ve never seen it, I urge you to go), some of the parishioners have had trouble with the mess the food pantry causes, even though Sara and her helpers always clean it up, and the three tons of groceries distributed each week has caused some wear and tear on that beautiful—and very expensive--altar, handmade of polished hardwood. (I love beautiful things, and I confess I spared a tear for that altar.) Yet unsurprisingly, it’s *because* of this messiness and oddness, rather than in spite of it, that Sara Miles became so committed to her vision.

“It was the materiality of Christianity that fascinated me,” she writes, “the compelling story of incarnation in its grungiest details, the promise that words and flesh were deeply, deeply connected. I reflected, for example,” she says, “about Katie, and about what it was like to be both a mother and a mother’s child. The entire process of human reproduction was, if I considered it for a minute, about as ‘intolerable’ as the apostles thought communion was. It sounded just as weird as the claim that God was in a piece of bread you could eat. And yet it was true.”

Then something funny happened: as the crowds of people outside St. Gregory’s grew, there on Potrero Hill, many of those waiting their turn in line began to hang around afterwards, asking if they could help, until soon, that first little band of co-workers became a community in itself—each hardworking member, no matter how “odd”, still absolutely valuable to the others, *worthwhile*, each of them satisfying their own hunger for meaning and relationship through serving others, through the labor and touch of human hands.

You can see why all of this came back to me as I began thinking about today’s gospel. Jesus is invited by a Pharisee—a member of Jerusalem’s elite—to his home for a meal—a highly significant gesture, because to share table fellowship with another was to validate that he fit safely inside the restrictions of the complex purity codes that governed everything from eating to sex. With the men reclining there at the table, a strange woman enters the room and falls to the floor at Jesus’ feet. To the horror of the Pharisee, the woman, whom he knows to be a sinner, “a woman of the city”, not only touches Jesus, rendering him unclean, but kisses his feet and bathes them with her tears, pouring ointment over them and drying them with her long hair. We can just imagine the Pharisee, writhing in discomfort.

Yet is it not, often, this same fastidiousness in ourselves, perhaps even this same fear of other people, of their actual bodily reality, that keeps us from truly understanding the brute facts of poverty, so well hidden here among us in Marin, but so real across the world? Hasn’t the word *pharisee* itself become a synonym for hypocrisy and self-righteousness, for disapproval of everything and every one that fails to fit within the strictures of our “normal” lives?

The real Pharisee draws back instinctively from the “sinful” woman’s gesture, assuming that Jesus must not know who she is, or he would surely send her away. *But Jesus knows exactly who she is.* If he hasn’t already seen her in the crowds following him, or heard her name bandied about by the men around him—perhaps even among the disciples themselves—he knows all that he needs to know from the tenderness and humility of her gesture, her touch—the way, perhaps, that she looks up at him, grateful for his smiling acceptance,

understanding that she is *known* by him--known, valued and loved.

“Jesus invites everyone to his table,” we say with our friends at St. Gregory’s, as we offer the bread and the wine to all who desire it, for “we who are many are *one* body”, all sharing one real bread, one tangible cup. So that through the grace of God and the blessing of human hands, all those who are on the outside may be invited in, and all who are hungry be fed.