

Meeting Jesus at the Table  
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Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
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It was almost supper time. He sat on the couch, watching ESPN. She read the paper in the other room. Rather than going through the motions, they both considered just staying where they were, doing what they were doing, hiding in their own worlds, comfortably apart. But dinner together had been something they had committed to long ago. So they both moved to the kitchen to pull together a simple meal.

He mixed up a salad. She pulled out some leftover pizza and put it in the microwave. They reopened a bottle of cheap wine and poured a glass of water to go alongside it. They sat down. He offered a simple grace. They used to hold hands while saying the blessing, but that stopped a while back. Neither could remember quite when.

Just then, they heard a knock on the door. Happy to get up from the table, if only to relieve the awkward tension, she hopped up. The person at the door knocked again before she could get there. When she opened the door, she saw someone she had never seen before.

He had longish hair, a medium complexion and kind of a beard. She noticed instantly the kindness and invitation in his eyes. Then she remembered hearing something about a man going around the neighborhood. Yes, now it came to her fully. This stranger would appear at someone's door, act as if he knew them and ask if he could come in. He'd never hurt or threatened anyone. No one knew anything else this odd wanderer.

Still, she instantly thought to herself, it's a dangerous and unpredictable world. An urge to close the door as fast as she could seized her ... when the man said, "I have come to give you something."

"Who is it?" the woman's husband asked from the dining room. Hearing no response, he joined his wife at the open door to get the answer for himself.

"I have come to give you something," the stranger said again. For reasons they couldn't quite identify, neither could bring themselves to close the door on the man. After all, he didn't look dangerous. There was a softness about him, nothing that would indicate hostility or violence.

"Then, go ahead and tell us what it is," the husband said curtly. He figured the stranger was a salesman with some kind of free but worthless gift if they listened to his sales spiel.

"I have come to give you life."

Great, the woman thought. Life at an island resort somewhere, all a part of a timeshare scheme. Come to think of it, she paused to reconsider, maybe that's just what we need. A place to get away from each other.

The stranger was not going away. He continued to meet the eyes of both the wife and the husband with an infectious warmth.

"Thanks but no thanks," he said as he closed the door. The couple returned to the dinner table. By now the pizza was cold, as cold as their marriage had become. They both poked around with their salad and took a sip of the cheap wine.

Her mind wandered back to the time when things had been different, so different. Both had been married before, and both had been hurt before. So they were both surprised when they were given the gift of a new start in what seemed to be an almost perfect marriage. They called it a God kiss.

They had come from different backgrounds, which is why their friends, upon hearing the news of their engagement, were skeptical they would ever make it in marriage.

"This won't work," one had said in a sarcastic tone that still hung in her ears.

"I give it 2, maybe 3 years," another chimed in.

A third friend had said words that had sunk deep.

"The idea that all a marriage needs is love is absurdly naïve," this "friend" had said. "Not in this world. Not in these days. They ought to know better."

All of that had made the surprise of the success of their marriage even sweeter.

But, as time passed, the sweetness also passed and the hard work of marriage began.

Their differences intruded again and again. She came from a large, extended family. He was an only child. He was rural, she from the big city. One was right-brained, the other more left. He outgoing, she introspective.

Differences in their native cultures and their orientation to life that once seemed to be the spice of life now seemed to feel more like heartburn. At times, it felt as if they barely spoke the same language. A well-intended comment was read as insensitive. A decision that made perfect sense to one seemed completely unreasonable to the other.

Yes, she had envisioned something very different for their marriage when it began. He was doing the best he could. That was all he had to give.

They even tried God. They were both religious, so they thought the Bible might help them locate the common ground that now seemed so far away, so hard to find.

They read the words of Jesus. At the start and end of each day, they shared their favorites. He was particularly fond of **Matthew 11:28-30**:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

She favored the Gospel of John, with all of its signs and symbols and deep reassurances of God’s presence amid the storm. In the mornings, she prayed with John 14 in mind:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

At, at night, John 16:33:

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

O that it would be so, she had prayed.

Then came the big fight. They had disagree about whether to move several states away, closer to her family. That’s how it started. But then it seemed to take on so much more meaning.

He said the worst kinds of things, personal, hurtful things. At first, all she felt was shock. Then, for a long time, his words played in her head like a tape on a loop, over and over again, in the morning when she brushed her teeth, anytime her mind was not occupied with something else and, especially, at night when she lay in bed.

She knew she was anything but perfect. She did all she knew to do. But despite her most sincere, well-intended efforts, she had hurt him. They had hurt each other, deeply. Perhaps their friends were right. Perhaps their differences were just too great.

So they nibbled at their cold pizza and salad and sipped their wine, making small talk even as their minds considered the worst: Would they make it?

After a long pause, he went ahead and said the words:

“Well, I guess the honeymoon is over.”

“Yes,” she said. “You can say that again.”

The doorbell rang again. He looked out the front window and didn’t see any visitor’s car in the driveway.

“Him again, that stranger” he muttered. “Probably so,” she said, as she rose to answer the door.

And, before either of them knew quite how, the stranger was standing in their living room. It was the last thing either of them wanted to deal with. They shot each other glares of anger, as if to blame the other for letting this guy in.

Then, just as instantly, the stranger was sitting in the big arm chair in the living room and the couple were on the couch. And they were talking to him as if they had known him since childhood. They shared openly with the stranger – what had been their highest hopes, now their deepest hurts and darkest fears about their marriage and all sorts of other things. The stranger listened to both of them with a kind of grace that invited their best behavior and most gentle honesty.

When he spoke, his words had a kind indirect directness to them, as if he was making a point that, at once, spoke to their immediate feelings and fears but then went deeper. And, whoever he was, at least he was quoting scripture.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

Both the wife had exactly the same thought at exactly the same time. “Damn straight,” they said to themselves. “Now he is talking about me. I’m glad he knows I am the righteous one. I am glad he is clear about at least that much.”

The husband looked at the floor to avoid eye contact with either of the other two. She looked out the window in the other direction. They would talk and then sit in silence. For what seemed to be an interminably long time, they just sat. The couple marinated in their thoughts, their questions, their fears, their resentment and righteous self-satisfaction and, at the same time, their profound hope they could find a way, not so much backward to how things had been, but at least forward to a better place than where they were.

The stranger interrupted the painfully awkwardly silence.

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

Then, another long period of silence. Again, they sat in silence for a long time with the oil-and-water mix of hope and hopelessness.

Then suddenly the stranger was at their dinner table with his hands spread out over what remained of the cold pizza, salad and wine. And the stranger said:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Amen.