

# Encountering Jesus at the Table

*Lent 2025*

*From Members & Friends of The Abbey*

## Introduction

Jesus shared meals with people everywhere he went, and through food, he tended their most basic needs, providing both physical and spiritual nourishment. He ate in people's homes, like when he joins Martha and Mary in Bethany. He ate with people on the hillside, like when he fed the 5,000. He ate with his disciples on the beach, cooking fish over a campfire. He ate with sinners and tax collectors, people who violated the well-being of the community and damaged their relationships with others, but Jesus welcomed and hosted them around a meal to bring them to the abundance of God's love. He ate with the least of these, those who are considered the stranger, the sick, the poor, and the imprisoned, claiming them as worthy and making them whole. He ate with the travelers along the Road to Emmaus who hosted him in their home, but then he hosted them in their own home, an act of mutual hospitality. He ate with people like you and me. Sharing meals is how Jesus revealed the Kingdom of God because it was an embodied expression of unity, grace, love, and service to share food.

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*“Then they told what had happened on the road [to Emmaus], and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.” (Luke 24:35)*

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Through the ministries of The Abbey, we have discovered that the table takes on many different forms and locations, and that the table serves as a tangible means of God's love and grace. No matter where the table is located, it is about encountering Jesus, and fosters connection and belonging that is grounded in the love of Christ.

# Invitation

Join us for a journey through Lent as members and friends of The Abbey share a story about encountering Jesus at the table of our everyday lives. The stories are from people with different connections to The Abbey and different experiences. You will hear from clergy and lay persons, followers of the Episcopal tradition and other faith traditions, people who are housed and people with no permanent home, young and old, healthy and sick, volunteers at Breakfast Church and those who come to receive food, people who are employed and those with little or no income. All have stories of encountering Jesus.

For this project, people were asked to reflect on how they encounter Jesus at the table. The stories have different interpretations of "the table" but share the common theme of the table as a means of God's love and grace.

The project has one story for each of the 40 days of Lent. Read at your own pace - daily, weekly, or whenever you find time. As you read the stories, consider how Jesus is made known to you in your daily interactions. You may want to use the following questions to guide your reflections:

- Can you relate to this story? Have you experienced something similar? How was Jesus made known to you through your own encounter?
- What is unusual, unique, or special about this story, if anything? How did it transform from a typical interaction to an encounter with Jesus?
- Does this story lead you to think differently about an interaction you have recently had?
- With whom do you typically share the table? Does that impact the likelihood of encountering Jesus? If so, how?
- How has Jesus been made known to you today?

May reading these stories help you to see the ways Jesus is revealed to us, the ways that the table can be a means of grace, and the ways our everyday interactions can become something holy.

**A Prayer for Story-Tellers:** *All-loving and gracious God, you are the source of all creation and the author of our lives. You made humanity out of love, for the purpose of love. We give thanks for these individual stories that glorify the power and presence of your healing love and grace among us. Help us see that behind each name is a beautiful story that is interconnected with our own and that we are all connected with The Story you call us to help narrate. Guide each new chapter we live to reflect your creative Spirit within us. All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

## Welcome to a holy Lent!

# Stories for Reflection

1

## COMMUNION

I begin Ash Wednesday with the community that has formed around Breakfast Church, a beautifully diverse gathering of humanity with different life experiences and faith backgrounds. After discussing the day as a time to remember that we belong to God, we offer to make the sign of the cross on their forehead or hand with ashes. A few people receive it without hesitation, while a couple others definitively decline, but most simply pass on the offer without any emotion. Then we sing: *One by one - everyone comes to remember - we're healing - the world - one heart at a time....*

Many gathered begin to sing with us, when someone who had *declined* the ashes leans in and says... "yeah, I do want some of those ashes!"

Was he inspired by our earlier conversation that was such a moment of relationship-building? Or perhaps it had something to do with the song and its call to healing and unity? God only knows. But he seemed moved on this day to sing and smile and connect. For me, personally, I felt all of those things and a sense of the healing and wholeness God wants for us, which is both personal and relational. In this moment, I encountered the mighty power and presence of Jesus as I realized the breakfast we offer is more than a meal, it is holy communion.

Susan, The Abbey Worshiping Community and Breakfast Church

2

## A WELCOME PLACE

For me, the *Table* is a place of gathering where all are welcome. The *Table* represents God's reconciling work. It represents grace, redemption and healing. The *Table* is a place of gratitude, where we remember that Jesus became broken bread and poured out wine for us. The *Table* is where we receive with gladness the One Bread and the Cup as one people.

So, when we are hungry, thirsty, longing, wanting, desiring, lonely, restless, weary, worn down, depressed, dejected, broken, afraid, discouraged, discontented, burdened, grieving, or feeling forsaken – we find and receive rest, sustenance, healing, comfort, welcome, and peace at the *Table*.

And all we must do is come... *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.* (Isaiah 55:1-2)

All we must do is come.

*just adam, Zion Spring Baptist Church*

**3**

### MY PLACE AT THE TABLE

Growing up the only time I can remember praying as a family was at the dinner table on Thanksgiving or Christmas. We didn't attend church often, nor did we talk much about God, however, I found a place that offered me a spiritual connection. That place was called St. John's Catholic Seminary. It was no longer a Seminary, but housed the offices of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock, Arkansas and a neighborhood park. There were no swingsets or teeter totters, just a beautiful setting for a place of wonder, discovery, and reflection. My friends and I would ride our bikes there or walk through the woods crossing a ravine where a statue of the Virgin Mary stood by a small waterfall. I also spent a lot of time there alone because I could feel God's love and presence among the Gothic Revival architecture. In 8th grade I had a sleep over of all the girls in my Catholic school class for my birthday party. Once it was dark, we grabbed blankets and flashlights and headed to St. John's. I wanted to share my escape place, a rare gem, and a place that was dear to my heart. Sitting in the field that night, we looked at the stars for a few hours and we all agreed even an atheist could feel God's presence there. We still to this day reminisce about the night we spent in the field looking at the stars, and talking about heaven, hell and everything in between. God was definitely with us that night.

Brittany, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

**4**

### PARENTS NEED TO EAT TOO

I've experienced Jesus at my own kitchen table - or kitchen counter, coffee table, car, bedroom, even diaper changing table. Our son was born December 22nd, so we eat where and when we can. Before fatherhood, my wife and I would cook most nights, both enjoying being in the kitchen. Since, I think we have cooked a full dinner a total of 10 times. Priorities change, and feeding a baby is more than a full time job. But we still have to eat too! And through our loved ones, Jesus has kept us fed. Soup, quiche, shepherd's pie, pizza, coffee, candy, cupcakes, cookies, taquitos, tamales, and door dash on those nights when even cereal is beyond us. We have felt Jesus and been nourished by his hand. It affirms that our son has been born into a loving world, full of Christians and people acting like Christians, supporting his growth by feeding his parents who needed help feeding themselves.

Ben, The Abbey Worshiping Community

**5**

### ENCOUNTERING JESUS IN ADVERSITY

I was mad at God when my mama died after suffering from cancer because we were really close. I had already lost my dad because he never was the same when he came back from Vietnam in 1975. I was real close with my mama's mama too, she's called Mama-mama. After my mama died, I went to Mama-mama for everything.

When Mama-mama got sick with cancer, I challenged God. I said, "OK, God, let THY will be done." This was an encounter with Jesus Christ that saved me before I continued to go backwards. I wanted to be close with Jesus. I prayed for Mama-mama to be healed. She had the best doctor at UAB, where they have the brightest people from around the whole world, in my opinion. He said he just didn't know how this would turn out for her, especially at her age - she was in her 90's. She went through chemo and radiation treatments, and lost all her glorious silver hair.

I prayed and put all my trust in God, "if you could do it for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you can do it for me. Let THY will be done. I want her to be healed. But if that is not your will, I don't want to watch Mama-mama suffer, please take her swiftly." Jesus heard me and honored my prayer. Mama-mama is alive today and she is 98 years old!

Arnold, The Abbey Breakfast Church

6

## FOOD AS A SIGN OF GRACE

As an Asian American, I've often struggled to feel belonging - both in Alabama and in the Episcopal Church. Once in a while I get a hostile comment, but more often it's a lingering sense of invisibility, of living in a foreign land that doesn't see my wholeness.

Last year, I attended a conference at the Cathedral in Portland, OR. Needing some fresh air and, possibly, a nap, I wandered outside. There in the courtyard were a handful of guests from the Cathedral's lunch ministry, tossing around a foam football. One called out to me, "Kanichiwa! Nin hao!" (I guess he was trying to cover all his languages) - and threw the football to me. Unintentionally, I ended up part of a half hour game of catch.

It was only three quarters of a football. The guys pointed at a big, fuzzy dog. "She bit it. Her name is Kimono. She's half Japanese and half chow." "I'm half Japanese too!" I exclaimed.

The game ended with a water break. Someone handed me a very stale gingersnap. I was about to toss it discreetly, until I realized what that gingersnap really was. An outward sign of some mysterious, inner grace. A communion, not invisible, but seen - not withheld, but shared. I took a bite and went back inside.

Katie, The Abbey Worshiping Community and Breakfast Church

7

## GRANNY'S KITCHEN

The smell of biscuits in Granny's kitchen, a smell that always meant home to me. It was a familiar scent, one that pulled me from my teenage sleep when my parents were out of town and I was staying with her. Unlike the rushed mornings at my own house, where breakfast was a blur of cereal, Granny's house was different. Even on school mornings, she'd take the time. She'd be up before dawn, humming softly to gospel music playing on the local radio station as she cooked, frying bacon, scrambling eggs, and baking biscuits.

I'd stumble into the kitchen, still half asleep, and she'd already have a place set for me at the table. There was no rush, no frantic search for backpacks or last-minute homework checks. Just good food and Granny's company. She would talk about faith and family. It wasn't a sermon or a lecture. It was just Granny sharing her heart. It was a moment of connection, a moment of peace. It was Jesus, present in the love and the warmth of my Granny's kitchen, reminding me of the importance of slowing down and sharing a meal.

Ross, Episcopal Church of the Ascension

## ENCOUNTERING JESUS IN THE JOY OF DANCING

Miss Traci, our St. Stephen's Avondale breakfast chef, made a real hit that day! We were serving mini "quiches" and the neighbors were perplexed; enthralled, but confused. We quickly renamed the little gems "breakfast pies."

One of the regulars, J, was the most enthusiastic, to the extent that he seemed less mentally altered (perhaps less schizophrenic) than usual. Soon everyone was raving about Miss Traci's pies, and of course before long the inevitable questions came, "Can we have seconds?" and "Can I take one to my buddy?"

As servers we were pleased that the pies were such a hit, but also explained, as we often must: seconds are only available after everyone has had firsts. Next thing we know, J hits the ground and literally "breaks" out in dance for a second helping.

He's actually quite talented and so very polite, "Ma'am, may I please have another?" How could we resist? We absolutely could not! And so, gazing upon his beautifully joyous face, eating his breakfast pie and shining in the early morning sunlight, we absolutely saw the face of Christ in our midst! Thank God.

Lisa, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

## "I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO VISIT ME"

I was sitting at a table with six residents of the institution where we were hosting a Kairos weekend and two of my fellow Kairos team members. This was several months after I attended a Cursillo weekend and my first Kairos, and I was out of my comfort zone. The conversations were strained as it was the 1st morning of the weekend, no one knew each other, and I'm sure there were trust issues. Part of the draw for the residents to attend a Kairos weekend is the food that is served, and I had always heard "they come for the food and leave with their hearts full of God", but we had not yet served any meals. We listened to several talks and meditations and had brief discussions about what everyone thought the talks meant to them, but it was a little bumpy. Then the time came for our 1st meal that consisted of quality food prepared by loving hands and served with warm smiles. This was the best meal many of the residents had eaten in over 20 years. We proceeded to dig in and suddenly the conversations started to flow not only at our table but the other seven in the room as well. The Holy Spirit was doing her thing as the guarded shields carried by the residents were dropping and replaced by smiling faces. I found my shield dropping as I too felt the spirit swirling around our table. The weekend took off from there and never slowed down.

Steve, The Abbey Worshiping Community

## THE SUSHI WAS NEXT TO THE FRIED CHICKEN

As a kid, I went to an all Japanese-American Methodist church out in California. At the time, there were still a number of members who were first generation immigrants who came to the US in the teens and 20's, historically known as the "Isseis." Most had been Buddhist, but like my parents had converted to Christianity. Despite being in the country quite a while, their English wasn't great, so we always had to

have a bilingual minister. The congregation, including we kids, had to sit through the sermon in English and then again as it was translated into Japanese for the Isseis. We kids could get pretty fidgety, especially since none of us could speak Japanese. Despite the language barrier, the one thing that would bring us all together were the social events, especially the food. On the big table in the social hall, you would see the sushi and chicken teriyaki next to the lasagna and fried chicken. Before eating, you would also hear the Lord's Prayer being said in both English and Japanese. Despite the language differences, God's table was for all of us.

Pat, All Saints Episcopal Church

11

## SHARING AROUND THE TABLE

Each Tuesday evening the Education for Ministry (EfM) group meets at Saint Thomas Church to share a simple meal and to listen to the call of Christ in our lives. Each week a different person cooks the meal and we all sit down to eat. We enjoy this holy time together. Then, one year I decided to change the process. Each student was responsible for bringing his/her own "brown bag" and we sat around the table eating. It didn't take us time to realize that something important had been lost! The mood not as lively and the conversation was more shallow as each of us concentrated on what WE had brought instead of what had been generously provided.

This reminds me of the story of Mary and Martha in Luke's gospel. Martha is the one who prepares the meal so all of the guests can be fed. Mary allows herself to be served so that she can concentrate on what Jesus is teaching. Too many times we read this story as if it were Mary versus Martha. It's as if we need to choose sides. But my EfM experience has convinced me that the story speaks about the "both and" experience of the table. We, as Jesus' disciples, are called to bless everything that goes into the meal—the generosity of those who prepare it and the enjoyment of all who share it. If you forget one, you lose something precious.

Lou, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

12

## CONNECTION & BELONGING

I am a member of The Abbey, which started as a coffee shop in Avondale in the heart of the entertainment district. The idea was to appeal to people who lived or worked in the neighborhood. It has attracted an eclectic community of Jesus-followers.

I grew up Presbyterian but didn't go to church that much as an adult until I moved to Birmingham. Once I found The Abbey, it has been a great fit for me. I have remained with The Abbey through its closing of the coffee shop in 2019 and the different locations where it moved before settling down in the parish hall of Zion Spring Baptist Church who has been hosting us since 2022.

The Abbey has always been a *place* of connection and belonging as we follow the Way of Jesus. But being on the move for a few years as exiles, especially during Covid, helped shape The Abbey into a *way of life* that fosters connection and belonging, no matter where we might be located. During Covid

we even started using GroupMe as a digital location to stay connected with updates and check-in questions. Through the experience of being exiles, we managed to take a difficult time and make it work. It strengthened our faith community in ways we could not predict. Jesus works like that. Jesus meets us wherever we are and we realize divine presence at the most unexpected times. I believe Jesus has been guiding me and The Abbey the whole time.

Molly, The Abbey Worshiping Community

13

### **WHERE I LEARNED WHAT IT IS LIKE TO SIT AT THE TABLE WITH JESUS**

I was ten years old when my mother had surgery in 1965. She came home from the hospital, and within 24 hours, she unexpectedly died from a blood clot. She was 40 years old. Early that morning, my pastor father woke my sister (12) and me (10) to share the tragic news. I was in shock.

Mrs. Marguerite Smith, a close family friend and neighbor, stepped in with kindness. On the Sunday after my mother's passing, she invited us to lunch. My father accepted. She prepared a feast—roast beef, rice and gravy, English peas, sweet tea, and chocolate pie. After the meal, she said, "This will be an open invitation until you don't need or want to come anymore." For the next two years, we sat at the Smiths' table every Sunday after church.

Her love and hospitality carried us through our grief. In those meals, I experienced what it is like to sit at the table with Jesus.

Malcolm, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

14

### **TRUSTING GOD**

About 16 years ago I fell 10 feet off a ladder landing on both feet. Immediately I felt extreme pain in my left foot and was unable to stand up. I did have my cell phone, but no one answered so I crawled around my house to get inside and called an ambulance. Diagnosis was a severely crushed left heel that would require surgery and extended rehabilitation. Once I had the surgery, I began to look at how I would be able to pay bills without income. Being a widow I was dependent on my salary to cover my bills. I reviewed my bills looking for those that could be held or not paid. I looked at my monthly pledge to my church. Initially I thought I could hold that one and catch up later.....but then I heard a voice say "trust", "trust God to take care of this - the pledge is to God not just the church". In the past I had talked about trusting God in difficult times; now I was the one who had to put my words to work and trust God. So, I kept the pledge on the list of bills to be paid and God did take care of me. My boss called a few days later and offered me the opportunity to work from home during my recovery so my salary would continue uninterrupted. I never missed a paycheck during my 3-month recovery and all bills were paid including my church pledge. This taught me the importance to always listen to and trust God to work things out. He is always at my side.

Jane, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

15

## ENCOUNTERING JESUS AT THE TABLE OF CONNECTION

I encountered Jesus at The Abbey's Christmas Eve service at Zion Spring Baptist Church. To be honest, I encountered God, the Holy Spirit and Emmanuel. What I experienced was an energy, a rather divine energy, that made me feel as close to Jesus as I have in a very long time. My belief on how this occurred was through the parishioners showing up for one another the way Jesus would. Differences went away - it did not matter whether you were a housed or unhoused citizen to gather with us for worship, or whether you had a good voice or not to sing karaoke at the reception after the service. Being seen and seeing was the theme, and true connection was made. As said in Luke 24:35, "*Then they told what had happened on the road [to Emmaus], and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*" It was in this connection the divine energy was most apparent.

Emily, The Abbey Worshiping Community

16

## TRAVIS

I grew up in the Norwood neighborhood of Birmingham, Alabama. It was a mostly middle class community, but uniquely diversified - ethnically, socially, and economically. Travis was a good friend of mine. His family was very poor, living in a small garage apartment on the outskirts of Norwood proper. As well as my friend, Travis was our paperboy. Every Saturday he'd come around to make his collections. One such Saturday, Travis asked if I'd like to share Sunday lunch with him and his family. His invitation took me by surprise. I mean we were runnin' buddies, but we'd never visited in one another's homes. When my surprise cleared, I responded, "Sure, Travis. What time should I come over?" "Soon as you get home from church," he offered. When I told my mom about Travis' invitation, she reminded me that she had planned to fix a delicious pot-roast meal for Sunday. All I could say was, "But mom, Travis is my friend." Come Sunday I walked the four blocks to Travis' home. After introductions and a few niceties, Travis' mom invited us to the table. We all sat and joined hands, as Travis' dad said grace. The mom then brought our food to the table. There it was, a big bowl of collard greens with pot liquor, and a pone of cornbread. This happened seventy years ago. Reflecting on it now, I realize that I was there to honor my friend and his family. And somehow I knew that Jesus would show up to eat collards greens and sop pot liquor with cornbread. He's like that, ya know.

Rick, The Abbey Worshiping Community

17

## BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD

When I was 11 years old, my brother and I were outside playing church and we were pretending like the "Holy Ghost" was playing with us. But I *really* caught the Holy Ghost, for real! I joined the church after that, and that's when I found Jesus. I was amazed by Jesus because I read my Bible and was going to church and learning about him. It was a blessing to me when I was a little girl and I thank God to this day that I can go to the Bible and find Jesus in the Scripture.

I'm 60 years old now - I've had a full life in Christ and *still* living for the Lord. Even after I came up with breast cancer, had a double mastectomy, and then 10 years later had cancer again. I'm still here and I just thank God for my life. And during this time, I lost my baby son, but God kept me strong and at peace through the whole thing, saying, "I got you!" I knew this was true because even though I went through anger, doubt, and questioning God, I heard him say to me, "Be still. And know that I am God." And I'm at peace!

Harriett, The Abbey Breakfast Church

18

## COMING TO THE TABLE

Like many, growing up in small town Alabama most people were either Baptists, Methodists, or Presbyterians. Like Jan Karon's Mitford series, there were only a few who attended the Episcopal Church at the far opposite end of the street.

My first encounter with the Episcopal Church was as a 12-year-old boy soprano who was asked to sing in the choir for the Christmas Eve midnight mass at St. Wilford's in Marion, Alabama. Not only was the music so wonderfully different from my Baptist upbringing, but the celebration of communion, AKA *The Lord's Supper* in the Baptist Church, was a radically different experience.

In my early Baptist tradition, every month or two, and always at the evening service, the deacons served the congregation broken saltine crackers on a plate along with Welch's grape juice in little unit dose cups that were passed down the pew. It was a self-service sort of event. However, at St. Wilford's, everyone, including me, was invited to come to the altar rail where the bread and wine (real wine in a dry county) were served by the priest. My first time at the rail was a holy experience. So different from anything I had known before. I felt welcomed. I felt the presence of God in that place at that time.

At the table, we are reminded of Jesus' sacrifice through the communal offerings of bread and wine; our sins are forgiven. He is calling us to be disciples.

Bill, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

19

## CHRIST IS PRESENT AT THE HEALTH CLINIC

Once a month I find myself in the waiting room of UAB's Kirklin Clinic for infusions. It's a busy place, with people of every walk of life and every state of healing or disease imaginable. People come from across town or as far as other states. They come with friends or family, and some come alone. Seating is close so it's virtually impossible not to overhear stories as patients share with the stranger on their right or left where they are in their journey. Occasionally there will be a wave of recognition warm someone's face as they realize they know the person sitting across from them, sometimes a friend or maybe someone they see each month in that same place. Almost everyone comes offering a sense of vulnerability that is palpable. Just a smile can convey "I know, I'm scared too." Strangers offer words of encouragement and comfort and even pray for one another. Through our vulnerability we open our hearts to one another and in those moments, Christ is present. I leave tired but filled with the knowledge that Christ is always with us. We share the body and blood of Christ in the words of goodwill and prayers that are offered, in the shared glimpses of empathy and in the laughter that occasionally erupts. And in those rare moments when the bell rings, signifying the end of a series of treatments we all rejoice, silently saying, "Go in Peace to love and serve the Lord, Alleluia, Alleluia."

Sally, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

Many things happen around a family's kitchen table. In my case, the table started as a simple, square table for one (me). Before long, four people gathered around that table and it became the heart of our home. Eventually, we purchased a large table with two extension leaves, allowing it to expand. Every evening, we would gather, say our blessing, and joyfully finish with: "**Let's eat!**"

As time passed, life became busier. Many times, we didn't all make it to the table together, but it remained a constant presence—a familiar gathering place in the rhythm of our daily lives. Most days now, the table has room for just two. It's often covered with books, papers, and a laptop—quiet reminders of how life has changed. But it remains a place of connection.

Recently, our expanded family of fourteen returned for a week. That table was again filled with love, laughter, and the clatter of dishes. Hand in hand, we bowed our heads and spoke the familiar blessing that has echoed through generations:

**God is great, God is good. Let us thank Him for this food. By His hands, we are fed. Thank You, Lord, for daily bread.**

And with joyful voices, we all declared: "**LET'S EAT!**"

The kitchen table has seen it all—new beginnings, growth, absence, and return. Through every season of life, it has remained a place of gathering, love, and gratitude. More than just a piece of furniture, it is a witness to the blessings of family, the power of prayer, and the enduring strength of home. By His hands, we are fed... **What a blessing!**

Jerry, All Saints Episcopal Church

On April 27, 2011, 360 tornadoes tore through Alabama, leaving a trail of destruction. It was a terrible, tragic day.

The small towns of Phil Campbell and Hackleburg were decimated. I volunteered to serve food there. As I drove toward the feeding site, I crested a small hill, and suddenly, the lush green forest turned to ashen-colored flatland. Trees were scattered on the ground, and piles of debris marked where homes and buildings once stood.

Large white tents surrounded by rows of cars and trucks signaled the feeding site. With trepidation, I exited my car. The humidity clung to me like hot vapor, and flies swarmed around. A formidable woman, wearing a bandana and an apron, approached me with authority. "Grab a hairnet and some gloves," she commanded. Soon, I was slopping food onto the plates of people whose eyes reflected terror, but whose lips praised God.

The survivors spoke of their great loss and expressed gratitude for the volunteers' compassion. "I see God at work here," one woman cried. The impromptu organizer of the effort was the woman who had greeted me. "I'm from Louisville, Kentucky," she said. "I managed restaurants up there. When I saw the pictures, I knew I had to help. I came a few days ago in my RV, bringing all of these pots and pans. All the work I've ever done has led me to this moment, where God is using me."

I saw Jesus in the hungry, hurting survivors and in the generosity of so many who came from far and wide to feed both bodies and souls.

Mary Bea, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

22

## WHAT DOES THE WORLD NEED? HOW CAN I HELP?

I have never heard the voice of God. I longed for years for him to speak to me, but He was silent and seemingly distant. My son came to me in 2013 wanting me to see the cinema release of *Les Miserables*. I went begrudgingly. As I sat in the theater, I took notice of Jean ValJean as he met the Bishop. The Bishop's song warmed my heart. "Come in sir for you are weary and the night is cold out here. Though our lives are very humble, what we have we have to share. There is wine here to revive you, there is bread to make you strong. There's a bed to rest til morning. Rest from pain and rest from wrong". The metaphor is that of the Holy Eucharist. The message I received was the grace of God and service to others, especially those on the margins. The church was presented as one who welcomes the stranger and offers aid. I felt many emotions, but what I felt most was peace and relief. Possibly for the first time in my life I felt God's grace (you are loved and you are forgiven). The remainder of the story built on that theme and illustrated the love we should have for others.

In John's Gospel, Peter is asked by Jesus three times "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter responds each time that he does and Jesus replies "Feed my sheep." At its core, the message of Jesus and his invitation to the table is about forgiveness, reconciliation, mercy, love, and hope. Our response is in how we demonstrate and share this hope with others.

Brett, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

23

## A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

I've been a deacon now for 22 years. The table is at the heart of my ministry. Deacons set the table for the feast. It's a level playing field on which all are welcome, all are fed with the same food. There are no favorites. It's a beautiful metaphor for God's unconditional love.

I'm the chaplain for Founder's Place, a respite care program for people and their care partners living with brain change. These people have led very productive lives as teachers, researchers, doctors, lawyers, business owners, but are now confronted with significant loss as their brain changes. It is a challenging time for them. And yet Founder's Place is a joyful experience, a community that recognizes that every person has the need to be loved and the ability to offer love no matter what they have lost cognitively. They are all children of a loving God, and so we play, exercise and sing together, do crafts, and share and learn, however we are able.

I lead a dementia friendly service every month, that roughly follows the structure of the prayer book, but with simple language, short readings, a homily, familiar hymns, and communion. It is such an engaging service. Everyone is smiling, singing and praying together. At the peace folks all greet each other verbally or nonverbally. And at communion the joy and peace reflected on faces is a gift to me. It's just plain folks, people without guile or pretension, showing love to one another. It's what church should be all about.

Mark, St. Luke's Episcopal Church

The first time I met JR was on a Friday morning when I help at Breakfast Church.

I heard JR say, "I do a little mechanic work." I walked to my truck and took out a  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch drive ratchet with a  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inch socket. JR said, "Whoa, what you gonna do with that?" I responded, "First, I'm going to hit you with it. Then I'm going to screw you into the ground." JR knew I was joking, and his face broke into a big smile.

JR never took any food because he'd already had his breakfast of two 16-oz Hurricane malt liquors and several "Cowboy Cools" (Menthol Marlboroughs). JR became an integral part or our community of volunteers and recipients of food-sharing with those less fortunate. Someone might say, "Why are you feeding those capable of working?" I always answer, "God does not put qualifications on benevolence."

Bill, All Saints Episcopal Church

One summer in college, I hoped to stay in town for work instead of returning home. My pastor connected me with S & K who had welcomed many students before. They welcomed me just as easily.

S & K live in a beautiful purple house outside of downtown Birmingham. A long walkway leads to an enormous front porch—one that has become, for me, a symbol of divine hospitality. That porch has hosted countless gatherings: church dinners, birthday celebrations, weddings, Christmas parties, political fundraisers, even my own graduation party. Sometimes K would set out an elaborate feast with polished silver. Other times, S's version of hospitality—chips and salsa, sometimes a little stale—would be enough. But the real feast wasn't the food. It was the community.

On that porch, people from every walk of life gathered. Young and old, people of faith and no faith, wealthy and struggling, liberal and conservative, Black, White, Asian, and Hispanic. The conversations were not always easy, but they were real. Here, people were invited to show up as they were—to speak, to listen, and to be present with one another.

S & K might not know it, but they taught me about the Kingdom of God. They didn't just talk about hospitality; they lived it. Not for recognition or reward, but because faithfulness meant opening their doors and their hearts to whoever would come. In a world that feels so divided, their porch became a sacred space, where love made room for all. And in that space, Jesus was made known to me.

Caleb, The Abbey Worshiping Community

When I look back at my time at The Abbey over the years, the event that always stands out the most is Saint Martha's Table – the pay-as-you-can lunch, where everyone sat at the same table. It did not matter your background, your job, where you live, or anything. It was God's people sitting at the same table, sharing the same meal.

I look back to a time in high school when I would see kids sitting alone at a table. They were the "other". People didn't want to be around them. They were ostracized and made to feel unwelcome.

We do that today with the "other" members of society. Homelessness, substance use, mental illness, all of these things play a role into the fears that we have. So how do we overcome those fears? Where is God in all of this? I encourage you to invite the "other", whoever that is in your life, to sit at the table and to be the face of Jesus for him or her. And I also encourage you to sit at the table with the "other" and look directly into the face of Jesus. What will Jesus say? And what will you say to Jesus?

Jonathan, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

27

## JESUS ALWAYS COMES TO THE TABLE

At seminary in Austin, I completed "field education" at All Saints Church, working five to ten hours each week during my second and third years of study. One assignment, which extended throughout those years, was to take communion to an older, homebound couple every Sunday. The husband and wife were welcoming, warm, proud Texans. The husband had served as a judge for forty years; the wife had been devoted to her family and community. When I met them, they were in wheel chairs, their bodies having failed them. The husband's mind was as sharp as ever; the wife's memory was a bit less sharp.

Each Sunday afternoon, we gathered around their living room table, where they proudly displayed a Longhorn football signed by Coach Mack Brown. I would open my communion kit and lay out the elements of communion which had been blessed that morning. We would read the scriptures and share the meal. After they discovered that I sang in the seminary choir, they would ask me to sing.

Looking back, I believe I learned as much about the eucharist in that living room as in the seminary classroom. I learned community is formed as we come around the table. I learned we are strengthened in our weaknesses as we come around the table. And, I learned Jesus always shows up when we come to the table where he promised to meet us, no matter where that table is or what it looks like.

Cindy, All Saints Episcopal Church

28

## JESUS IN THE ORANGE

The disciples knew Jesus when he broke bread and shared it with them. (Luke 24:35). I sensed His presence as I shared sections of an orange. When I was in high school, my friends and I hung out by the duck pond in the town park. We were pretending to be hippies; some of the men among us were older (probably in their twenties), and the park police kept an eye on us. These were the 70's, days of long hair, beards, hip huggers, and the War on Drugs. At that time, I was allergic to church services because the congregations were all hypocrites. God was in empty churches and places like the woods behind the park—any uninhabited natural setting.

One spring day, my friends and I were standing around talking behind the swing sets at the edge of the pond. I happened to have an orange, which I peeled and took apart, section by section. Passing one section to each of my friends, I realized that we were sharing Holy Communion. Something like a warm smile passed through me and marked our sharing as special. This happened over fifty years ago; today I see that it was a first experience of feeling Christ in other people.

Sarah, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

29

## WE PRAY THE SAME

It was 27 years ago. I was chaplain in a large Catholic hospital. In ICU was a young student at the local college who had been in a serious MVA. He was comatose a long while. He was a Muslim from Cairo, Egypt. I became his mother's advocate as she continued his prayers, spoke to him in tender Arabic tones.

She and her husband flew in from Cairo and during their stay, I invited them to dine with us at my home. As we sat around the table, laden with things I knew they could eat, my 5 year old son took our hands and started Grace: "God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. By his hands, we are fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread."

Rashad looked surprised. I asked him if everything was OK. He smiled and said, "We pray the same. But God we call Allah."

Later, when their son woke up, we shared another meal of thanksgiving.

We pray the same.

Marge, The Abbey Worshiping Community

30

## BELONGING

A discussion in response to the statement, "I think Breakfast Church is about community...what do y'all think about that?"

Robert: Well...God loves...and that's what this community is.

Brad: I can't always remember everybody's name, but I know who they are and most of them know me by my name. And if I've been gone for a while and then show back up, everybody wants to know where I've been and says they've missed me. It makes me feel like I'm part of a community that cares about me.

Robert: Yeah, we have a relationship. And everybody cares about us here.

Brad: And sometimes after Breakfast Church some of the volunteers invite us to go across the street for more coffee at Satellite and we just sit around with each other and talk some more.

Robert: It shows God's love.

Ross: For me, at first, Breakfast Church was just about serving breakfast and coffee and a brown bag lunch. But not long after I started participating, I began to discover it's not just about the food, even though a good meal helps, but it's more about the connection you make with other people and learning about everybody...it's like how Jesus shared meals with everyone...it's about belonging.

Robert (reaching in for a big hug with Ross): You make some great friends out here!

Robert and Brad, The Abbey Breakfast Church; Ross, Episcopal Church of the Ascension

**31**

## **BREAKING BREAD**

I had lunch with a man convicted of murder. He offered up this confession without me asking. There would have not been a way otherwise for me to have known that he had been in prison or really to know anything of his life before this moment when we ended up at the same high top table. I had nothing to share with him. He talked about a woman he loved and worried about. I offered something meaningless in return. His life had been changed, as I guess all our lives are over the years. I doubt that he remembers me, but maybe he remembers the time when he found someone quiet enough to listen to what he had to say. I found someone bold enough to reveal what could be used against him in a world that can be too cruel sometimes.

The stories about Jesus focus on His strengths – the miracles He did, the great stories He told, the way that people flocked to Him in droves. Fortunately, the storytellers did not take out all the humanness of Him. They left in the tears he shed, the anger he showed, and the mistakes he made – yes, mistakes. He ate with people like the man I spoke to at the St. Martha's Table lunch at The Abbey. He ate with people like me. People who are deeply flawed, but also deeply divine.

Heather, The Abbey Worshiping Community

**32**

## **BETH'S BAPTISM**

Back in the seventies, when my children were growing up, I had two lovely stepdaughters who spent every other weekend in our home and attended church with us. Accordingly, when it came time for my children to be confirmed, we arranged for my stepdaughters to be confirmed as well. There was only one problem—one had never been baptized. Our priest said, "No problem. The Bishop can baptize her when he comes." As it happened on that Sunday, the person responsible for altar guild neglected to place a towel by the Baptismal font. No one noticed the missing towel until the Bishop, not missing a beat, wiped the water from her forehead with the hem of his chasuble. It was such a sweet moment. I had a visual sense of Jesus welcoming the children and maybe taking a child into his lap and using the hem of his robe to wipe the sweat off the little forehead.

Donna, The Abbey Worshiping Community

**33**

## **SIMPLE BLESSINGS**

My grandmother had a huge, round oak table in her kitchen. Almost everything that happened in her house centered around that table. She used it to let cakes cool before icing them. We shelled peas and cut corn on her table. We blessed the food before we ate at the table. The blessings were simple and short, but full of gratitude and love for one another. I think about those blessings sometimes on Wednesday mornings as we gather around the folding tables holding hot water, instant coffee, and the lunch bags we serve for breakfast ministry. We bless the food and the people gathered, and then we eat. We talk with those we have known for a long time and those we are meeting for the first time. All are welcome.

The tables are more than just a place to put oatmeal and hot chocolate. They become the altar where we share the love of Christ with this community; this community where we share our own stories, painful and joyous, over coffee and donuts; this community where we protect each other and welcome each other. It all starts around a simple table, a table that becomes God's table, and a group of people who become a community of God's people.

Ron, All Saints Episcopal Church

34

JR

I met JR at Avondale breakfast ministry on a Friday, The Abbey day to host breakfast for our friends. He was hard to miss, riding up on his bicycle, talking long before he parked his bike. He was a flirt and a gentleman, rarely eating and often giving his lunch bag to someone else. I loved talking with him at our breakfast table ... learning tips about cleaning my always dirty car, talking about God, Jesus, old hymns, anything! Our Friday team and several of our guests started meeting at the coffee shop across the street. JR was often a part of that gathering. He said he joined us because of the relationships.

JR developed metastatic cancer and faced it bravely, directly and openly with all of us. He was moved to hospice where he was cared for with dignity and gentleness. I went to visit JR while he was in hospice. I walked into his room, told him I was there and I was going to sit with him for a while. I held his hand and told him that everyone was asking about him. I reminded him of all of the things we loved about him and how God loved him. I softly sang all verses of "Amazing Grace" and "Come Home" over and over again. I paused and told him it was ok for him to let go and go home to God. I started humming Amazing Grace. He died peacefully within a few minutes.

I never knew what JR stood for, perhaps Jesus in Relationships!

Deb, The Abbey Worshiping Community

35

A JOYFUL CHILD

Jesus was recently made known to me in the joy of a child at the communion rail. A 3yo child (CC) who attends my parish was recently accompanied by another young friend and that friend's mother. CC and his parents kneeled at the altar rail for communion, but CC's friend had to wait for space to become available. As soon as CC received communion, he rushed over to where his friend had knelt and closely watched his friend. CC had a huge grin on his face and nearly glowed with joyful anticipation. It was the kind of look a child would have before sharing that they had seen Santa Claus. Maybe CC just wanted to see his friend's reaction to the taste of the wine. Maybe CC was just anxious to race his friend back to the pew. But I prefer to think that CC was filled with wonder and awe and couldn't wait for his friend to experience the same thing. CC is too young to fully grasp the concept of communion, but he's not too young to feel like something special is happening. In that moment, Jesus made himself known to me in the grin of a child wanting to share a holy experience with his friend.

Lynn, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

My mama had me in church every Sunday. I couldn't do anything else during the week - no playing with friends, sports, games, movies, ice cream or concerts - unless I went to church that week. From day one, I felt Jesus' love from my parents. My mama lived her life like Jesus and guided me to church so I could know a better way of life and learn the Scriptures. I'm glad she did that because it built up my faith in God and now I put my faith in God in my everyday living.

That's what gets me through the day, because right now I'm homeless and I'm dependent on God. When I turn to other people to help me out, I get let down or misguided, and that can mess with my faith. I start questioning if God is real and if God is with me. This makes me get frustrated and down. Before I got homeless, I never knew about this situation, and it's just too hard sometimes.

Not too long ago, I was ready to give up, ready to go. I was standing up on the bridge, crying, "God, I'd rather be with you. I'm just so tired of going through what I'm going through. I can't do this life any more." At that moment it didn't matter.

Somebody came walking by and asked me why I was standing on the edge there. I told them I was done. But that person helped me change my mind. Sometimes people judge me and mislead me, but that was God in the person at the bridge who reflected Jesus' love, and that strengthened my faith in God.

Michael, The Abbey Breakfast Church

Years ago, a young girl won a recipe contest with her homemade "Nutella dog." It had three simple steps: 1. Spread hazelnut Nutella on a hotdog bun. 2. Insert a banana. 3. Enjoy! Perhaps "enjoy" is the most important step.

Food can be fuel, but it can also be a celebration. The table for me is a celebration of nourishment, relationships, and most importantly the enjoyment of something delicious. Jesus didn't just eat at one table but traveled throughout Israel eating at many tables. I imagine that during those meals he talked about the love of God, the meaning of scriptures, and I hope they also ate some great and delicious food.

I see Jesus at the traveling table when folks bring food to share. Early in the morning, cookies and pastries will mysteriously appear before a Bible study. Leftovers will materialize in the fridge with someone's name on it. Cheese platters and treats will be waiting for us after a service. When I see food spontaneously appear around St. Thomas, I imagine it is because someone made it with so much love, they needed to share it. Someone perhaps put so much intention and joy into the preparation that they want to excitedly share the treat with others. They want to share the enjoyment, to share the love. Isn't that the love of Christ? When you have so much love in your heart that you need to share it with others?! I see Christ in the traveling table that brings food to love and share wherever we gather in His name!

Josiah, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

I take Penzey's Spices motto "Show people you love them, cook them tasty food," to heart. I started serving coffee on Fridays with the Avondale Breakfast Minstry, but that morphed into serving hot oatmeal, and finally grits. The grits have become a hit and there are some people who come mainly for the grits, and they pick up a lunch bag, a bottle of water, and a cup of coffee while they're there. My friend Mark has noted that when our friends come for grits they are coming for communion, to eat of the love that is in the crock pot of grits. I think some get to feel the love that draws us to serving them.

Micah tells us "to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Jesus gave us a new commandment, simply "... Love one another." When we hand someone a warm bowl of grits or a hot cup of coffee to warm them on a cold morning, or help to fill an empty belly on a warm day, we humble ourselves to our friends. I frequently tell a person as I'm handing them a bowl, "I made this just for you." And I did, for each and every one. That's how I can see what Jesus meant.

Avondale's recipe for grits: 1 gallon whole milk,  $\frac{1}{2}$  gallon water, 1 container Lakeside Mills Yellow Grits, 1 lb. hot sausage, 8 oz. sharp cheddar cheese, 2 Tbs salt, 1 Tbs pepper, 1 Tbs Penzey's Justice spice blend. Oh, and don't forget the love.

Marshall, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

The Avondale Breakfast ministry got its start through The Abbey's coffee shop. Occasionally, one of our street friends would ask us to store their leftovers (from another restaurant) in our commercial refrigerator.

One super busy afternoon, an older man came in the back door. He was short, with a long beard and hunched shoulders. He was carrying a loaf of bread - a fancy, unsliced loaf that I wondered if he'd gotten from a cast-off food giveaway at the Continental Bakery. He approached the counter as I was helping three other paying customers at once.

"HEY!" he called, trying to get my attention. I figured he was in line for his free coffee and grilled cheese sandwich. "Wait just a few minutes, till I finish making these cappuccinos," I said. "I'll get with you then."

He waited patiently, and when I finished he came back up. "Hey, I wondered if you could slice this up and keep it?" he said.

I was irritated. "I cannot store your leftovers. The health department will shut us down."

It was his turn to be irritated. "I was just trying to give you a loaf of bread. Thought you could use it for your ministry, that the guys might like their grilled cheese sandwich on something other than Wonder Bread."

Oh. When I get into my own head, I can run short on the ability to see the Sacrament of love and thanksgiving being offered right here and now. Everyone has something to share.

Katie Nakamura Rengers, The Abbey Worshiping Community and Breakfast Church

One Sunday afternoon, Mocha Mike (as he's fondly known at Breakfast Church for the way he likes his coffee) showed up at The Abbey, saying, "I love getting to see everyone during the week at breakfast and I thought I'd come see what The Abbey was like. I'd just be all by myself if I didn't come here."

Afterwards he commented, "The food sure was good...I'd like to come back." And he has come back almost every Sunday since then and has become a confirmed member of The Abbey.

When he was asked to share a story about "when have you encountered Jesus lately," he said:

"When I feel loved. I feel like I belong here because people care about me and I care about everybody here. I'm not so alone when I see everybody at Breakfast Church and The Abbey. I like being a member of The Abbey."

Encountering Jesus in the love received from others is about as good as it gets. And the people of Breakfast Church and The Abbey also get to experience Mike's love and feel connected to him as an important member of each community. He shares his heart, he prays with and for us, he always asks how you're doing or lets someone know they've been missed when they've been gone for a while, and he is always happy to see you. Mocha Mike reveals the face of Christ to all those he encounters.

Mocha Mike and Pastor MO, The Abbey Worshiping Community and Breakfast Church



### YOUR TURN

What is the encounter you could tell about how Jesus has been made known to you in the everyday places of your own life? Tell us YOUR story of encountering Jesus at the table!

## Concluding Prayer

**A Prayer for Hospitality:** God of humility and hospitality, you nourish us and sustain us by pouring your love into us. Enliven our hearts and minds to your Spirit's work in our lives, that we may humble ourselves to serve as your hosts to the needs of the world, while also keeping us ever-mindful of our need for one another. Help us to expand our vision of your table and use us to draw people to your love, making more room for connection and belonging with you and each other in the name of Jesus. Amen.

# About the Contributors

The Abbey enjoys a variety of interconnected relationships that are part of an expansive table of mutual hospitality where we encounter Jesus through the holy communion of fellowship, food, and worship. The contributors who wrote stories for this Lenten project are connected to The Abbey in different ways and represent the following relationships:

- The Abbey Worshiping Community
- Zion Spring Baptist Church where The Abbey Worshiping Community is currently hosted
- Avondale neighbors who share in Breakfast Church
- Volunteers from local Episcopal churches who support The Abbey Breakfast Church
- St. Thomas Episcopal Church who is our ministry partner
- Friends who offer prayer, donations, and other gifts to The Abbey

## Connect with The Abbey

If you are interested in learning more about The Abbey or connecting with the worship or ministries of The Abbey, please contact our Chaplain, the Rev. Susan Oakes, [pastormo208@gmail.com](mailto:pastormo208@gmail.com). She will help you find your seat at the table of mutual hospitality with Jesus.