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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Coffee, Coconuts, Toast, and Jesus”

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Matthew 14:13–21

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

“Coffee, Coconuts, Toast, and Jesus”

Matthew 14:13–21

In San Francisco, where many food trends have been born, the latest culinary craze is toast. Yes, toast, which is currently being sold for four dollars a slice at venues around the city. One reporter decided to find the source of this craze and traced it to an unlikely spot: a tiny coffee shop called Trouble owned by a woman named Giuletta Carrelli.¹

Giuletta knows a lot about trouble because she’s had her share. From her teens she has suffered from a mental illness called schizoaffective disorder that for years went undiagnosed. As a result, she had never been able to hold a job or get a degree. She couldn’t keep friends or roommates long enough to settle down in one place. She’d lived in nine different cities before she was 30, often on the streets, and she struggled with substance abuse. Giuletta worked hard to get through each day. She was disconnected from others, cut off from herself, longing for change.

She was a lot like the disciples.

When Jesus strolled past a few fishermen and said, “follow me,” Matthew tells us that immediately those fishermen left everything — their nets, their boats, their families, their businesses — and did just that — they followed him. They followed him, even though they knew next to nothing about him. Which suggests that more than anything else, they were desperate for a change. And people who are desperate for a change are often struggling with the status quo, longing for something — anything — different.

For years, Giuletta Carrelli — the toast lady — thought that by trying new places and things — new cities, new parts of the country, new friends, new schools — she could somehow get her life back on track. Instead, all this movement increased her sense of instability and disconnection, not just from others, but from herself. This didn’t mean that she didn’t want to connect with others, though, because she did.

¹Jeff Gravois, “A Toast Story.” *The Pacific Standard*, January 13, 2014. Online at <http://www.psmag.com/navigation/health-and-behavior/toast-story-latest-artisanal-food-craze-72676/>. If you prefer an audible version, I first heard Giuletta’s story on *This American Life*: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/520/no-place-like-home?act=3>.

For a while, both on the streets of New York City and then later San Francisco, she found a surefire way to strike up a conversation with a stranger: coconuts, whole coconuts. With little to no income, Giulietta had discovered that coconuts were a cheap form of sustenance — for nearly three years, she survived mainly on coconuts and grapefruit juice. But more than that, coconuts were a conversation starter. Stand on a street corner in New York City eating a whole coconut and, even in a city notorious for making people feel lonely in a crowd, people will talk to you. For Giulietta, those few minutes of connection and conversation helped her feel grounded, human, more like herself.

Maybe it was this same longing for connection and conversation that compelled the disciples to walk away from their responsibilities and relationships and follow a man they knew virtually nothing about. What's pretty amazing is that, with one notable exception, once they aligned themselves with Jesus, the disciples stayed with him until the bitter end.

They stayed, but the gospels make clear that they didn't really understand who Jesus was and what he was about. Today's story is a case in point. Having heard Jesus' teachings, having seen him heal people with all kinds of physical and emotional disease, the disciples still can't fathom what Jesus is going to do with five thousand men and probably twice as many women and children who are stranded in a deserted place at dinnertime.

Their first instinct is to send the people away to fend for themselves. This is their suggestion to Jesus: "Jesus, it's getting late and this place where you were trying to get away from it all is in the boonies. You've got to send these people away so that they can get something to eat." I suppose they thought Jesus would probably appreciate their help in this matter — after all, he'd been awfully busy healing everyone; maybe he had just lost track of the time. But instead, he turns it right back to them to solve the problem. "There's no need to send them away," he says. "You give them something to eat."

At this point, I imagine the disciples casting sideways glances at each other to see if they'd actually heard him correctly. Did Jesus realize how many people were here? How could the disciples possibly be expected to feed them all?

Giulietta Carrelli's life finally gained some stability when she met Glen, an elderly man who came to the same stretch of San Francisco beach every day to sunbathe. She began to visit him daily and the continuity of their friendship helped her to create other areas of continuity in her life. She started swimming every day when she came to the beach. She made friends who looked out for her. She found a job in a coffee shop and kept that job for three years — a record for her. Where she still struggled was in finding a steady place to live. She was in and out of apartments and often slept in her car. One morning, her boss arrived at the coffee shop to discover that she had slept there the night before. Instead of firing her, he told her that it was time for her to open her own shop. "He gave me permission," she said, "to do something I knew I should do."

And so, with help from friends in the form of advice, money, and physical labor, Giulietta opened a coffee shop and called it Trouble — actually, the full name is Trouble Coffee and Coconut Club. The menu is refreshingly simple: coffee (but no decaf and no non-fat milk), whole coconuts served with a straw and a spoon, shots of grapefruit juice, and thick slices of cinnamon toast. Each of these items means something to Giulietta: coffee is what she's good at after years working in coffee shops, and it brings people together for connection and conversation; coconuts and grapefruit juice represent survival for the years she lived on them; and cinnamon toast is the ultimate comfort food from her childhood.

Trouble is a tiny space, and this is not by accident. Carrelli calls her little shop with its limited menu "a sociological experiment in engineering spontaneous connection between strangers." It has been decorated with mostly found materials and donated labor and it has deliberately been set up to create human encounters. There is hardly any seating, so customers can't divide up into pairs or trios or disappear behind their laptops. As a result, those who come to Trouble end up interacting with one another, friends and strangers alike. One visitor observed that the people there looked more like neighbors at a block party than customers at a cafe.

"There's no need to send them away," Jesus told his disciples that evening in the wilderness. "You give them something to eat." And so the disciples took what they had and used it to feed these people who had come to the

wilderness to bring their trouble to Jesus. Imagine how empowered the disciples felt as they handed out food and saw it multiply. Imagine the community created during that impromptu picnic. Imagine the connections and conversations that took place among families, friends, and strangers as they ate their fill and shared their leftovers.

I hope it won't offend you if I say that to come to worship in a Christian church these days means that you know something about trouble. Maybe not the exact kind of trouble that Giulietta Carrelli knew, maybe not the kind of trouble the first disciples knew, but some kind of trouble...at the very least, some awareness that things in this world are not the way they are supposed to be. Maybe the trouble you have seen has taught you that life is more than just the accumulation of wealth and titles and material things, maybe it's taught you that relationships don't usually follow the plot lines of fairy tales, maybe it's taught you that addiction is all too easy to fall into and way too hard to escape. Maybe the trouble you've seen has taught you that there is no rhyme or reason to suffering...or to joy.

There may have been a time when coming to church was simply the thing to do, and people did it because everybody else did it too and because there wasn't much else to do on Sunday morning anyway. But that's not true anymore. You don't need to be here today any more than the disciples needed to leave behind everything familiar and follow Jesus, any more than those thousands of people needed to follow him into the wilderness without any plan for dinner.

We walk through those doors, we come to this table because we are hungry. We are hungry for something we don't understand and can't always put words to, but it's something that looks an awful lot like the connections and conversations that happen over coffee and coconuts and toast at Trouble. We are hungry for a place where people don't judge us by what they see on the outside. We are hungry to be known for who we really are...and not just known for it, but loved for it. We are hungry for connection, hungry for meaningful conversation, hungry for comfort, hungry to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

It is probably not overstating it to say that Trouble has saved Giulietta's life. Because of her coffee shop and the daily routines it provides her, because of her habit of walking the same routes wherever she goes, and because of her unmistakable uniform of head scarves and tank tops and tattoos, people know who Giulietta is. They stop her to say hi and to chat, and when she's having a difficult day, when she's struggling to feel grounded and connected, this saves her. As she says, someone saying hello to her when she's struggling might make the difference between her getting home that night or not. And through her coffee shop, Giulietta has offered to others the same connection and conversation and comfort that she craves. At Trouble, using just coffee, coconuts, and toast, Giulietta has found her place.

Jesus knows all about trouble — mine, yours, Giulietta Carrelli's. Jesus couldn't even get a few hours alone in the wilderness without desperate people bringing their trouble right to his feet. Jesus knows we are hungry, he knows we need each other, and he knows we need God. And so, he feeds us. Right here, at this table, with the simplest fare — our version of coffee, coconuts, and toast — Jesus feeds us, saves us, and gives us exactly what we to find our place. Amen.



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