

The sensory life

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We see. We taste. We touch. We smell. We hear. To be human is to move through time and space guided by our senses. Reading this passage from Luke, I think about the sensory onslaught that defines my existence.

The menu said it was sweet potato pie. It looked like sweet potato pie. After shoveling a forkful into my mouth, I knew that no matter what they called it, it had to be something else.

I walked into my building and smelled an unusual odor emanating from the direction of my normal route to the elevator. My body, without asking my permission, walked toward the stairs instead.

I held the hand of a dying parishioner and felt warm flesh become lukewarm. Then it became cold.

Our senses are the directors of the cinema of life. They yell, "Action!" They scream, "Cut!" They shriek, "That's a wrap!"

We who preach the gospel must be aware that the text is a feast for the senses. Our sermons do a disservice to the text and to the gathered community if they don't cause listeners to see, taste, touch, smell, or hear differently.

This text begins with the senses. The Pharisees are watching Jesus closely. What will he do on the Sabbath? To whom will he speak? Upon whom will he place his hands?

What will he say? Has Jesus been invited into the home of a leader of the Pharisees because sooner rather than later he will sensorily offend his host? The anticipation of drama is palpable. The Pharisees want a front-row seat.

Jesus, however, does some watching of his own. He observes guests taking seats at the places of honor. He listens to their conversations. Luke does not record their words, but no one enters social spaces like these in silence. And after Jesus takes in enough data, he speaks. As Jesus is wont to do, he casts a vision of an alternative world through a stark, challenging parable. Those in the home of Jesus' host heard it. We hear it two millennia later.

What will our parishioners hear? For the love of God, let's not preach this story flatly. Show the people something. Allow them to smell and taste what was served at that fraught social gathering. Help them to overhear the conversations that Luke did not record. Let your words bring your listeners so close to God's inbreaking reign that they will leave worship issuing invitations to the banquet of life to the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see, taste, touch, smell, and hear it together.