

TO BE CHRISTIAN

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Bloor Street United Church

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Sunday, January 31, 2010

Based on Reading: Luke 24:36b “He was known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

Introduction:

We’re into the last days of January, cold Sunday afternoons lie stretched ahead, but for a brief shining moment next Sunday we can travel to a South Florida and watch the singular, most popular sports event of the season: the Superbowl.

Now when I think: football, I travel back to my high school...which was eons ago for me... Back then I actually played football. And because I was a big and lumbering giant, the coach put me on the line. Those of you who know football will know that linemen are human bulldozers. No finesse, very little strategy...You just plough ahead, bashing whatever is in your way. But what you perhaps do not know is that all linemen have a dream. We all wanted to get our hands on the ball, make a touchdown. Now offensive linemen could never do that because the play would be ruled dead as soon as we got hands on the pigskin. But on defence it was another story. The whole point of your work was to tackle the ball player so harshly that he would drop the ball and you would pick it up. Or perhaps you’d be lucky enough to intercept a pass.

And I was ready. Yes, I was. I could picture myself running down the field, ball in hand, dodging tackles left and right. I even practiced a little victory moon dance to perform after I spiked the ball in the end zone.

Well one Friday afternoon, in my last season, it happened. I stood up from a block and the opposing quarterback lost his grip on his pass and sent the football right to me. I still can feel the amazement as I caught it and looked down at the brown pig skin in my grasp. I finally had my hands on the ball. This was my dream come true.

To Be Christian

Can you feel it? The excitement, the exhilaration of my greatest hope coming my way, coming true.

Well, now you know how I now feel when I get *the* question. It doesn't happen often...in fact it's quite rare. But last month a university student came up to me and handed me the ball ...asked *the* question all preachers are waiting to answer: So ...what does it mean to be a Christian?" Innocent, bold. No sign of cynicism. This kid really wanted to know. He'd heard of us Christians. He'd come to the church to fulfil part of his learning covenant by participating what we call bread day. Looking up from a bowl of flour he was mixing, he wondered what made us tick. What was special about us? "What does it mean to be a Christian?"

I got my hands on the ball ...I don't want to drop it. This was a teaching moment...I can see that in his eyes. He really wants to know and what I say will have a serious influence.

How do we answer?

Here's how I replied.

To be a Christian is to break bread ...

Let's back up and explain.

I could easily have told this young man that to be Christian to accept Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, to study and pray, to witness and worship until one feels the strength of personal relationship with the carpenter from Nazareth. And then on the basis of an overwhelming sense of goodness and joy to commit one's life to following in his path.

That's half my library boiled down into a single paragraph. To be Christian is to follow Christ in the way. Not unlike the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, our out task as Christians is to get on the road. The destination is of less consequence than the journey. The story of the road to Emmaus is presented by Luke as a metaphor. The church is a work in progress, we are on the way to God's reign, but we have not yet arrived. As such we are a company of faith-filled pilgrims that honours the broken and frail. None of us is complete and finished. As one great theologian, Reinhold Niehbur once said, "Anything worth doing takes more than a lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope."

I could have said all that but I could picture my student's eyes glaze over ..."Oh really," he would say, "What a clever idea...We should talk about this more sometime."

Right, if theological doctrine is the wrong route, maybe I could have been flippant. To be Christian is to argue and discuss, to never be satisfied with cheap answers to life's exacting questions. Again the story of Emmaus is instructive. Look at the two travelling away from the triumph of Easter. They have just witnessed God's saving grace and what do they do? They spend their time debating what just happened. The church...a travelling debating club. Resolutions R Us.

And while I like the image of the church as a community that continually tries to fathom the faith that we all agree is beyond our understanding, I have a feeling that my questioner will not find that so satisfying. It's more a description of the technique of being Christian rather than the content.

In his eyes I can see the plea. "Get to the heart of the matter. Stop beating around the bush. What does it really mean to be Christian?"

So I draw a deep breath and I say "To be Christian is to break bread..."

It all begins and ends with bread.

Here, in a perfect world I would bring this student to our bread day activities to make my point. Once a season our church makes bread, plenty of bread, 400 loaves. We shape and bake it and then give it away. It takes about 8 hours.

Come into the kitchen and see what is happening. Homeless people from the street and the long time members of the church are mixing dough together. Turn to the right and you see a well-known dermatologist and an unemployed heavy equipment driver working the same bowl. They're exchanging guy stories. On the left are a clutch of mothers, some with no financial worries, a few with no clue where the next meal will arise...they're telling pregnancy stories.

To be Christian is to form a circle where there are no distinctions. No one is higher or lower. All are welcome and accepted.

Bread day progresses with a rhythm of creative chaotic energy. You can imagine when we want to bake that much bread out of a few industrial ovens, it takes a lot of huffing and puffing. No one is in charge and everyone has an opinion and while it seems like a tremendous act of trust, so many chefs and so few sous-chefs, eventually all the bread is baked.

To be Christian is to join a circle where all serve and are served. No restricted access to the gifts of God.

But it's the actual breaking of bread that makes my point. When the first loaves are baked we break them open, get out the butter, lather it on ...and you can see the

smiles grow as people sigh and smack their lips. “There’s nothing quite like fresh bread, right out of the oven.” Bread ...free and abundant.

To be Christian is to join in an ancient feast ...Luke put it this way, “Jesus was known to them in the breaking of the bread.” And Luke was not making a vague reference to Eucharistic mystery. He was underlining the simple fact that in the hands of the followers Jesus’ bread was a tangible living embodiment of God’s love: bread shared is God’s abundance, and acceptance of us.

In a perfect world I would bring my student to bread day and have him stand with those who spread out across the city to share their bread ...with no other agenda than to share the joy of hot fresh bread ...The student would hear things like this: an unemployed chef crying with gratitude, “My kids will bless you for this...they love fresh bread.” ...*He was known to them in the breaking of the bread!*

A gynaecologist replying to the offer of fresh bread given by a neighbour who wanted to welcome her to the neighbourhood, “What kind of a church are you? ...*He was known to them in the breaking of the bread!*

And my favourite, a lesbian witch, a member of coven and the brightest university student I have known saying to me when I handed her a loaf of bread she in fact had helped bake, “If I were a Christian I would join this church.” ... *He was known to them in the breaking of the bread!*

In a perfect world I would do all that, but we don't live in a perfect world, do we...so my message was simple ...begin with bread...give it away, freely, share with strangers and friends alike. I know you will find ways to share bread with the people who pass in the street, with the desperate in Haiti and elsewhere, with lost souls in our hospitals and nursing homes. To be Christian is to share a simple meal, a meal where all are welcome and no one leaves hungry.

Of course it won't always go as we imagine. If you're still back at my football story and wondering how I managed once I had the hands on the ball ...well it wasn't how I pictured. I took two steps and got tackled hard...But later the coach told me it was my finest hour ...So let us fret over results ...To be Christian is to be part of an unfinished work. Let us find the courage to extend a hand with bread and who knows where it will take us.

Scholars tell us that Emmaus is powerful narrative, an imaginative tale created by Luke. But most likely Emmaus never happened. It's a fiction. And while this may be true, the Christian will reply, "Emmaus always happens." It does. To be Christian is to break bread ...as for them back then so it is now for us..."He was known to them in the breaking of the bread."