



November 20, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

"Breaking Bread"

Readings: Luke 24: 13-35

My neighbour Michael is fanatical about Halloween. His front yard is not much bigger than a postage stamp but every year Michael manages to find a little more room to add in a couple more tombstones, witches and vampires. His fervour has made his house a destination for trick or treaters in the neighbourhood. I must admit I never really understood Michael's fascination with Halloween until this year when a conversation I had with him the morning after the big night shed some light on his obsession. That morning I was in my car pulling out of the driveway on my way to work when I saw Michael packing up the last of his decorations. I rolled down the window to chat about how many kids had come to his door the night before and how many to ours and I reflected with him on the way his enthusiasm seems to be rubbing off on others in the neighbourhood. That was when he started to reveal his master plan. Yes he said there is good participation on one side of the street, but it would be great to get participation down at the far end of the street. Maybe the people who are moving in next month will get them going he suggested. Then he turned to me and spoke the words that gave me a deeper insight into who Michael is, he said "It's all about community. It's all about the kids. It's great for them to be able to go out in their own neighbourhood and feel welcomed."

I've often described Michael as the perfect neighbour. He shovels our walk when it snows. The night a tree fell on our house he was out in the back yard with his flashlight checking out the damage before we were, ready to lend a hand. In a world where so many feel isolated and alone, Michael helps restore my faith in humanity.

It's easy in our day and age to feel the loss of a sense of community. The makeup of our neighbourhoods has changed and we don't have the same natural affiliations we once did with our neighbours. On a larger societal scale, we fight for our individual rights, we get uptight about personal information being shared in ways that violates our privacy, we've learned to be cautious about showing care through touch, we close our doors at night and can't name the people who live across the street or across the hall. Sometimes we don't even say hello to those we see every day because their downcast eyes send the message loud and clear "don't bother me." I might know Michael's name, but there are many others on my street with whom I've never shared a word.

And yet the need for human relationships and a sense of belonging is still as strong as it ever was. Perhaps one of the greatest indicators of this is the success that Facebook has had. Even though people criticize Facebook for not being "real" interaction between people, Facebook is all about relationship. And yet the one thing Facebook and the internet cannot replace is the community that gets developed through face to face interaction; the community that is developed when people who wouldn't necessarily friend each other on Facebook are seated with each other side by side, breaking bread together sharing the depths of their lives with one another.

Despite all the failings of the institutional church, I still believe that one of the greatest things the church has to offer the world is a place to experience community in real time and space, a chance to experience the sacred with other living, breathing human beings in ways the sacred cannot be experienced in isolation and a place to belong.

A few weeks ago the Living the Questions group discussed the topic of resurrection and the question of how we are to understand Jesus' death and resurrection if we don't believe or can't believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus' body. As part of that discussion we watched a video clip of Dominic Crossan speaking about the story of the road to Emmaus, the story Julia read for us this morning.

This story, which is told only in Luke's gospel, takes place the evening after some of Jesus' followers have gone to his tomb and found it empty. Two travellers who clearly don't believe what the others have said have called it quits, they're heading for home. Suddenly a stranger joins them on the road and begins to engage them about what they're discussing. They are of course talking about all that's gone on in Jerusalem the last three days. And then the stranger begins to talk with them about Jesus, who he was and what he taught, until the day is nearly over and the stranger is about to leave them. But he's made such an impression on them they ask him to stay and break bread with them. And when he does, when he takes the bread and gives thanks for it and passes it to them, suddenly they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. It's Jesus, how could they not have known? And then before they know it he's gone. One of the things that scholars say about this story is that it clearly was never intended to suggest that the resurrection of Jesus was a physical resurrection. The way the stranger appears on the road, the way he is unrecognizable at first, the way he vanishes as soon as they do recognize him, all of these indicate that the story is pointing to a spiritual experience of the Christ.

Dominic Crossan says of this story that when he first began to study it in depth what occurred to him was that although we have always known that Jesus spoke in parables about God and God's vision for the world, this story that takes place on the road to Emmaus is a parable about Jesus and how the Christ presence is made known in people's lives. It's a parable about how we experience in our own lives the life-giving, transformative presence of the Divine that Jesus experienced in his life.

How does that happen? According to the story it happens when we're curious and when we're open, when we welcome strangers and share food with them that nourishes the body and the soul. It happens when we share with each other the pain of our life and the joy of our life; when we share our big questions about life like why bad things happen to good people and whether or not there really is a God. It happens when we share our stories about how we have come back to life after we thought our life was over.

One of the greatest things about the story of Jesus is that it paints a picture of a God who is known in the most intimate of ways, in the touch of a hand, in the washing of feet, in the sharing of bread and wine. The church is at its best when it reflects that kind of intimacy. It's why my favourite time on Sunday mornings is when we pass the peace, when friends and strangers reach out to greet each other. It's why the kitchen is always at the heart of church

community because it's when you sit down to share a meal with someone that you get to know them; or when you have your hands in the dishwasher beside them; or when you're pricing clothes for the Thrift shop or sitting at the tea table on Thursday afternoons.

We can learn all we want about our faith tradition from an intellectual perspective, but what we can never grasp with our intellect is what we experience in community. That's why these moments I have described are such sacred moments. It's also why the number one reason people say they come to church is for a sense of community, a sense of belonging. What's so wonderful about the church when its functioning at its' best is that there is no requirement for belonging here, you don't have to look a certain way or be a certain age or even believe what everyone else believes, you just have to be who you are, part of the human family.

I often think about what brings people to church in this day and age when there is no social stigma involved in not going to church, in fact when quite the opposite is true. If you're here on Sunday mornings these days you've probably taken some flak from somebody about it which means you're here because you want to be here, because you need to be here. Over and over again I watch people make their way to church when their lives are caving in or when they are new to the area and they are looking for friendship or when they are looking for a different kind of community in which to raise their children.

Whether we realize it or not, one of the reasons we come here is to be known.

I love that part in the story of the road to Emmaus when the travellers suddenly recognize who Jesus is because it says to me that to be seen and known for who we are especially when we are in our darkest moments in life is to meet the presence of the Christ within each other.

It also speaks to fact that to be in authentic relationship with one another requires risk and vulnerability. Sometimes it's hard for us to be seen and known by one another, sometimes we'd rather put on our game face and hide.

In the novel Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe the main character is shipwrecked and yearning for human contact for years on end. Then one day he sees a single footprint on the sand. One would think he'd be overjoyed at the prospect of companionship and yet Crusoe's first reaction is fear. He thinks perhaps the footprint belongs to the Devil and he runs and hides. When he finally does meet the source of the footprint, the man he calls "Friday" the complexity of their relationship causes Crusoe a great deal of self-reflection. That leaves us to wonder if Defoe's intent was to comment on an aspect of the human condition. We both long for relationships and we are terrified of them.

And yet if we are made in the image of the Divine, there is something about the pursuit of knowing ourselves and knowing others that brings us closer to the sacred and that helps us know where we truly belong despite the risk inherent in the journey.

One of the wonderful things that has happened here at Mount Seymour over the last few years is that our church community has started to grow. There are more new people here on Sunday mornings than there was not long ago. That's wonderful but it also makes it harder for us to get to know one another. So, as I mentioned in the announcements this morning we are launching a new initiative here at the church in January. By meeting once a month in small groups of

about 8 people in the home of a congregational member, we hope to create more authentic relationships between one another. We hope these groups will be places where we welcome one another in the spirit of Christ and where we experience Christ's presence in a deeper way as we share food for the soul together.

Like Crusoe, you won't know who you will be journeying with until you gather for your first group meeting, so these groups will require you to take a risk. What you will know is who your leader will be and what the group will do each time it gathers. Each session will follow the same format including time for personal sharing, time to discuss a question of faith such as Why come to Church? Or Does God have a plan for my life? And time to pray for one another.

The group leaders who have already started to meet with each other to prepare for leading you are David Ney, Mike Hetherington, Anne Ellis and Wendy Alexander. You will be able to start signing up for the groups next week when there will be more information available. The groups will run from January to June so they will have a clear beginning and a clear end. I have a feeling these groups will be a very rich experience for us as a community.

This fall my neighbour Michael's mother had a heart attack and life has changed for him and his wife. Michael has taken a leave of absence to take care of her. I have never actually sat down at table with Michael to share a meal, maybe we will do that someday, but for now, bit by bit we are beginning to share with each other the food that nourishes our souls, care and concern for one another, for our neighbourhood and on occasion when our conversation turns that way, care and concern for the world. Slowly we are beginning to see each other and know each other and in my way of speaking about that, the Christ presence is becoming more fully alive in the world. That's a good thing for neighbours and it's a good thing for churches.