

St. Michael and All Angels, Easter 3

May 8 2011

I am far more comfortable when I speak to people about all things religious to wear my church historian hat. It is a comfortable one for me because I usually know what I'm doing in that role. To speak with you about the meaning of these readings forces me to wear a different hat. While preparing this I realized that I probably having nothing new to add or I certainly do not come with any great insights.

I can tell you that I like the gospel story from Luke. It unfolds so beautifully and the ending comforts and uplifts me. This story begins on a road with friends walking towards a town and away from Jerusalem. I am not certain if they are journeying together as friends, business colleagues or some other matter brings them together. But it is clear that after they meet the stranger who is alone on the road they are living with grief, puzzlement and even fear. The events of Jesus' capture, death and now rumours of his missing body are causing them great pain. Their fear is real. The fear that grips people when all their hopes and plans are brutally dashed is present in this story. These companions have had their hopes of revolution lead by Jesus to shake off the coil of Roman dictatorship crushed. Now they are left wondering where his body is. Where is he?

In these days you could not walk alone for fear of mishap on your journey. And I have no doubt that after the "crackdown" that lead to the arrest of this itinerant preacher his followers are in hiding and they are fearful of walking about. These travelers seem to have gotten out of Jerusalem while it was safe to do so.

Our television and computer screens are full of images of rebellion and people who longer want to live in fear. Today people walk together so hopefully they will not be swept of the street and become a part of the "disappeared."

This stranger who joins them on their journey takes the time to instruct them in the scriptures. He speaks of the fulfillment of God's word and he offers hope even if the companions do not see it. Fear blinds. Grief blinds. These friends cannot see who walks with them because they cannot see beyond their pain.

Grief is powerful and it can cripple. Greif prevents us from seeing the blessings and the gifts around us. Grief can send us into darkness and fear. It is something we must walk through and even fight through.

When we are fragile the words “handle with care” truly matter. We must take care not to shatter the heart anymore or push the mind beyond what it can reason.

This stranger who walks the road is not revealed until he is invited to break bread with the companions. It is in the very act of breaking bread that he is revealed to them.

This image of breaking bread is so very powerful because it is the first reenactment of that last meal. It is the symbol and also the real act of sharing food – of nurturing body, soul and mind.

This simple act of hospitality – stay with us, share a meal with us – in that act of kindness Jesus returns to them truth, comfort and a future.

That act of sharing a meal as an act of hospitality is an old one and it is universal. It is right to welcome the stranger or the traveler and to give them sustenance and comfort. To violate the laws of hospitality is regarded in many cultures as a deep violation of honour and justice. Yet fear of the stranger has eroded our hospitality and it has only bred more fear.

Where would we be without simple act of kindness? Who would we be without both giving and receiving kindness?

We learn hospitality. We are taught it just as we are taught to share out toys (even if we don't like it.) But we are taught through example more than through words. The act of breaking bread reveals everything to these companions on the road. A simple act speaks more than an entire book.

So much of what happens in our lives; the things that shape and change us happen, in simple and extraordinary ways. My best memories are of kitchen tables. So much unfolds around the family table. We gather there for meals, homework, games, talking – just living. We even learn our first prayers at a table when we learn to give thanks for our meals. The simple act of gathering around a table to share gives shape to us. It teaches us so much from manners, to how to engage in conversation, and even how to feed a dog without looking.

We too will gather at a table a bit later this morning. We will break bread with one another. That act of sharing and being fed is a symbol of how we uphold one another, give strength and encouragement to each other and how we take our faith out into the world. Words feed us, fellowship feeds us and we in turn open ourselves to the world so that everyone can be feed. It's a big job.

Being feed, being nurtured is an important theme today because while we recognize this day in the Christian calendar as Easter 3 it is better known by everyone here and elsewhere as Mothers Day. Clergy of every denomination will tell you that today is a tough one for them. If they don't recognize Mothers Day – more importantly – say something nice about mother's they will hear about for months (possibly years) to come. You do not mess with Mothers Day.

The historian in me can easily tell you the history of this day – the old history and the more modern one. I am resisting that. I can also tell you that much of what we learn early on in our lives is shaped by our mothers. They teach the practical things we need to know, the basics of our schooling and the more subtle elements of life.

Two years ago our family was held and strengthened by the prayers and kindness of this congregation. Two years ago on Mother's Day our family gathered with my mother in the Critical Care Unit of the Heart Institute and said goodbye. She died on Mother's Day. And on a day that we have set aside to honour mothers it seemed appropriate that she should leave me on that day. She deserved to be honoured and loved and cared for by me and our family.

I was fortunate to have a good relationship with my mother. We were friends and just not parent and child. I was content to spend time with her, her company was as important as any friend's would be. She was my teacher, my guide, my strength, my light through so much of my life. What she taught will always be with me and what she showed me through example will endure forever.

The most important things she taught me were kindness to others, generosity of spirit and hospitality.

Most of you did not know my mother but I think of one story that captures who she was to a tee. One evening she was at the convenience store not far from our house and a young university student was in line ahead of her. He was picking up some basics of bread and milk and a few other items. When the cashier added up his bill he was short by a couple of dollars and he asked if he could put the milk back. My mother said "No, I'll pay for the bread and milk." The young man was rather stunned and she said to him "it's fine, you need these things and it's not easy to be a student." The young man thanked and left. Several months later she was walking down the street and that same young man came running off his porch to the sidewalk and said "you may not remember me but you helped me once. You bought me bread and milk. Thank you. It made a difference." I hope that one day that young man will not hesitate to help out the stranger in his midst. And something tells me he will give generously.

We will honour mothers today with meals, flowers, cards and other gifts. It has become a very important day for retailers who use the sentimentality of the day to entice us to honour Mom with a gift. I've received those gifts too. I prefer the handmade ones with an excess of glue and glitter. But the 5 gallons of ceiling paint I received a few years back is a pretty hard gift to top. My dear husband reasoned that it cost over a \$100 so it was a gift and he did buy my favourite brand!

But the real gifts and the true honours of this day are seeing the best of our mothers in us and the best of us in our children. As I sat with my mother on that last day I held her hand even though she had no feeling on the right side of her body from her stroke. I needed to touch her – to hold on just a little bit longer. At one point in the early evening I told my brother to go have a coffee and something to eat. He was tired and needed a break. I wanted just a little time alone with her to tell her that it was okay to leave us. I told her "Mom you did a good job of raising us. We are going to be fine and you don't have to stay with us anymore. I love you and thank you for everything you gave to me."

Nothing complicated; just simple words of thanks. She never asked for anything from us other than to our best and to achieve all that we could and to not waste our talents or gifts.

It seems to me that God asks that of us too. Give your best to others.

So as I continue on my journey in life I know i have many fine companions. They have comforted me in my grief, taught me to see beyond my fear and doubt, shared with me the best of themselves; they have done this out of love and faith. And each step, each challenge and joy will be made easier because of companions. My faith will be fed here, at this table. The simple act of sharing a table so that I can share with others is a powerful and lasting gift. I will keep my open on this journey and my heart ready to give and to love. I do nt walk this road alone because it is Easter. We are an Easter people. Our faith is simple. Christ has Died. Christ has Risen. Christ will come again.

Amen.