

3 Easter April 30, 2017

Broken

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It began as a terribly heartbreaking day for Deacon Tom Lambert and his wife. Their daughter's mental illness had gotten to the point where she needed to be hospitalized for a time. One morning the head nurse called Tom and his wife to tell them there had been an inexcusable mix up with their daughter's medications. She had been accidentally over medicated, which meant she was having a terrible day, the nurse said their daughter was, "out of it" and advised Tom and his wife to stay away for the day, as their daughter was in such bad condition it was unlikely she'd even be able to recognize her own parents.

As Tom himself tells the story, he and his wife immediately got into the car and drove to the hospital so they could see and assess the situation for themselves. When they got there, they saw it was not good. Their daughter was indeed, "out of it", although she did just barely recognize her parents, who spent most of the day helping to tend to their daughter's needs as best they could. It was certainly a disappointing and heartbreaking day, as Tom and his wife had been hoping the time in the hospital would help their daughter, not make things worse for her or them.

When there was nothing else they could do to help, and were tired and frustrated after a long day, Tom and his wife said goodbye and started walking out the door of their daughter's room. That is when their daughter turned to her father and said, "Dad, when you come back, can you bring bread?"

Tom, already exasperated, thought to himself what on earth could she possibly want with bread? So he asked her the obvious question, with probably more patience than he gives himself credit for: "What do you want bread for?" His daughter's response to that question forever humbled her father, and taught him more about the Real Presence of Christ than any theology book he had read or any seminary class he had attended. On that day of heartbreak, his daughter looked Tom in the eye and said two words: "Church Bread."

With those two words, Tom's eyes were opened, and so was his heart, for he realized his daughter was asking for the Eucharist, and just her asking meant that although they were all in the middle of heartbreaking day, Jesus was with them, Christ was present and that reality transformed that moment into a powerful one for Tom. He and his wife realized that even in their worst possible moments, God really is with them.

I heard that story last Saturday at NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) event aimed at helping create partnerships with local faith communities like Church of the Good Shepherd. As soon as I heard the story of Tom and his daughter I immediately thought of today's powerful Gospel reading from Luke's Gospel, which is the only Gospel to tell this lovely story of two disciples of Jesus walking with their heartbreak. From the way the story starts out, it is easy to tell these are two people dealing with grief, for they have lost more than a teacher, leader, and friend. They have lost hope of redemption. That is a lot of grief to process. And it seems they were doing it well, for talking about loss is an important part of processing and accepting so a person can learn how to live with that loss.

We heard that in the midst of their grief-filled conversation, the Risen Jesus sort of snuck up behind them and asked what they were talking about. Like the Resurrection encounters we heard the last two Sundays, these disciples didn't recognize the Risen Jesus. Only this time we heard the reason why was their eyes were kept from recognizing him. It wasn't that they couldn't see him, their eyes couldn't recognize him. It is a curious detail, certainly a theological observation that makes me wonder how often I am guilty of the same problem, of missing the Risen Jesus because there was something of myself getting in the way. Maybe fear. Maybe grief. Maybe impatience or frustration. Maybe a broken heart. All of which can be heard in the disciple's retelling of the events that have brought them to where Jesus and we meet them on the road, and can make them easy for any of us to relate to. Which is one reason why I am grateful for this story from Luke's Gospel. It gives hope for those of us who can be, as the translators so kindly and graciously put it: "slow of heart." Another way to translate that term, a more literal way, is "without minds." Sometimes I am grateful for the times translators go easy on us, as slow of heart sounds like eventually a person might catch up.

Jesus' interpretation of the scriptures and the story of salvation may have caused the disciples' slow hearts to burn, but it didn't do a thing for whatever was getting in the way of their eyes. He may have opened their hearts and minds enough to cause them to invite him to stay with them and share a meal, but they didn't recognize Jesus Present in their broken condition until Jesus blessed, broke bread and gave it to them. There was something in that bread being broken that finally cleared up those disciples' eyes. Isn't it interesting that it was broken bread that finally broke into their brokenness and they realized Jesus was with them? It wasn't bread in its beautiful presentation, or warmth, or delicious smell or taste. It was when Jesus broke the blessed bread. The brokenness did it.

Which might tell us something about Jesus' Resurrection. It isn't a celebration like the party we have come to know it as today. It is the Love of God breaking into humanity's brokenness, and being with us in even the worst moments. It is God

refusing to let us alienate ourselves from God. The disciples' walk on the road to another town can remind us God is the one longing to go for a walk with us, just like back in Genesis, those stories about the beginning, when God enjoyed showing up in the Garden in the evening for a nice walk with the people God made in God's image. We know it didn't last, those walks in the Garden. We know there was disobedience. We know there was blame. We know God sent people out of the Garden and the people began that walk away from the Garden, but just because they were walking away from the Garden didn't mean they had to walk without God. Although we can imagine where the people walked was much different than those Garden walks. In today's Gospel, the Risen Christ appeared and walked with his disciples, he let them set the pace and the destination while he helped them see what they had believed from a new perspective, and only in the broken bread did it all come together. And they turned around and went back, to tell a new story, one about the broken bread, new life, and the Risen Christ.

It is no accident that when we celebrate Holy Communion the pivotal moment is the breaking of the bread, what in liturgy we call the Fraction. The Fraction isn't just a practical thing we do to make it easier to share the bread, it is a theological thing we do to participate in Christ's Presence, here with us now through the Holy Spirit. We Christians have been breaking bread for over 2000 years and I have no doubt we will continue to, because we aren't sharing a source of nutrition, we are sharing Christ with us. Which is why as people develop allergies and other reasons they cannot ingest bread made with wheat or gluten, we have found other types of bread to break because it is far more important to make sure we participate in and share the Bread of Christ than to focus on what it is made out of.

This bread isn't magic. It is far better than magic. It is Christ Present, broken and present in our every moment, and may be why Tom's daughter, even in her overmedicated condition, asked for church bread. Brokenness is not a thing of the past, we can find it everywhere we go. In jobs that didn't work out, relationships that didn't work out, in parents grieving children who preceded them in death, in dreams that didn't work out, funds that ran out, I could go on. There are times when all of us, no matter who we are, will deal with brokenness; it is still a part of life. Christ's Resurrection is the Love of God breaking into that very brokenness, our broken hearts and broken dreams and broken relationships, into our broken parts of our lives, and makes it possible for any of us, like Jesus' disciples, like Tom, to see Christ in the midst of that brokenness and like the disciples and Tom, tell how we recognize the Risen Christ in our midst. Which is how days that begin with broken hearts can end with Christ with us.