



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Known In the Bread and Elsewhere

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

May 4, 2014

I love the story from the Gospel of Luke we just read. We enact it every time we share the Eucharist. The Fraction anthem that we sing says, "The disciples knew the Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread." The Eucharistic Prayer that we used during Advent and Lent asks us all to pray together, "Risen Lord, be known to us in the breaking of the bread." This concept of Christ in the sacramental meal makes us who we are, the Body of Christ.

The story is filled with mystery--in particular, the disciples' apparent inability to recognize Jesus right away. Of course, the story goes that they do suddenly recognize him, and then he blesses and breaks the bread, only to disappear immediately thereafter. But isn't this quite curious that the disciples did not recognize him as they walked along the road? This story lives in stark contrast to all the other post-resurrection appearance stories. No one else has any trouble recognizing him. So unless these are two particularly forgetful disciples, there is a different point being made here.

The Gospel of Luke was written decades after the first Easter. And it was written for people who had not been in Jerusalem or known anyone who had been a part of Jesus' inner circle. The question for such people would always be, how do we have the Jesus experience? How do we know him the way his disciples did? So we have here a story that tells us that he won't always be easy to recognize. He might be right next to us or in the next cubicle or at the cash register. What we have to do is to allow him to be revealed by expecting to see him and by being willing to see through outward appearances and by making a connection with the ones who hold the Christ within. In our Baptismal Covenant we promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons." That's what this story is all about.

It is with such a backdrop that we need to consider this past week, with all its ugly stories. Racism has grabbed headlines, dominated talk shows, occasioned the NBA to hand out the most dire sanction on a team owner in its history, and generally caused jaws to drop all over the place. We began with Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, who has been at the center of a controversy over unpaid grazing fees. During his moment of fame, he decided to branch out. After sharing his opinions about the state of the nation, he offered this. "I want to tell you one more thing I know about the Negro" and then he opined that the cause of high unemployment and levels of incarceration in the black community were because they don't have to learn how to pick cotton anymore, so maybe they were better off as slaves, picking cotton. Yes, still, in the 21st century.

But that was just the warm-up for the big circus. Donald Sterling, the billionaire owner of the Los Angeles Clippers NBA team, who made his money as an abusive slumlord, apparently doesn't want black people to come to the Clippers games, unless of course he has some angle to play. Supposedly, from time to time, he even used to make sure there were black patrons in his seats, and he even fooled the NAACP into giving him a lifetime achievement award. And of course, he is perfectly happy to have black

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athletes increasing the value of his team, but apparently they aren't his kind of people - they are the hired help.

Racism has been an oozing mess in our country for a long time and particularly visible in recent years. Racism negatively defines a person by physical characteristic and cultural assumptions. It is the refusal to recognize Christ in someone walking right next to you. Condemnation has come quickly for Mr. Bundy and Mr. Sterling. The latter may lose his right to own an NBA franchise. But that won't change anything, and Sterling himself will be quickly forgotten. Racism ends when hearts are changed and we can see the beauty inside of every person. Unfortunately, it turns out that is not the easiest thing for humans to do.

Popular author Malcolm Gladwell followed up his wildly successful *The Tipping Point* with a book titled *Blink*, which "is about how we think without thinking, about choices that seem to be made in an instant, in the blink of an eye -- that actually aren't as simple as they seem". (From the book jacket.) Gladwell has studied how we form our instant assessment of things and people and that often we don't even know that we are doing it. First impressions are important but they are not always right, as was certainly the case with Warren G. Harding. Many people assumed that because he was tall and impressive looking, he would make a good president. History has weighed in differently. Apparently, the human brain is predisposed to associate stature with success, no doubt a vestige of the long ago days on the savannah, where the biggest hunters usually brought home the best dinners.

These predispositions of the brain extend into other domains as well. When we first see someone, all kinds of instant associations are made. Harvard scientists have developed a way of testing this with their Implicit Association Test. The test uncovers our inherent biases. People discover that even though they were raised by a raging feminist, they still make implicit associations with women and nurturing, housework, softness, emotion. The most famous of the Implicit Association Tests is the one on race. Malcolm Gladwell has taken the test several times and is always left mortified. He says, "At the beginning of the test, you are asked what your attitudes about blacks and white are. I answered, as I'm sure most of you would that I think of the races as equal. Then comes the test."

The test consists of putting things into categories quickly--in other words, without thinking, relying on that fast processing system in your brain that so often tells the truth about what you really believe. The test starts with pictures of faces, black faces to the left of the screen, white faces to the right. Identifying which is which is easy, accomplished in the blink of an eye. But then it gets more complicated. Implicit associations are introduced, flashed across the screen so swiftly, you can't consciously catalog them--"black and good" and "white and bad." Then more pictures and words, and you are asked to associate them. Here's Gladwell's experience. "I found myself slowing down. I had to think. Sometimes I assigned something to one category when I really meant to assign it to the other category. I was trying as hard as I could and in the back of my mind was a growing sense of mortification. Why was I having such trouble when I had to put a word like "Glorious" or "Wonderful" into the "Good" category when "Good" was paired with "African American" or when I had to put the

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word "Evil " into the "Bad" category when "Bad" was paired with "white"? Then came part two. This time the categories were reversed." "White or Good", "Black or Bad". "And so on. Now my mortification grew still further. Now I was having no trouble at all? Evil? - *Black or Bad*. Hurt? *Black or Bad*. Wonderful? *White or Good*." Gladwell took the test over and over again hoping that the awful feeling of bias would go away but it made no difference. His test results rated him as having a "moderate automatic preference for whites." Malcolm Gladwell's mother is Jamaican; he is half black.

What these tests show is that our attitudes toward things like race and gender operate on two levels; our conscious attitudes, or what we choose to believe. These are our stated values. And then there is the unconscious level, the immediate automatic associations that tumble out of our fast processing brains before we've had time to think. This is hardwired in our brains, it has been there since the time we needed the security of our tribe to survive. Anyone else was a threat. Difference was permanently registered in our brains as a potential threat.

So when we meet a stranger, particularly one who is different from us, we have to overcome our blink assessment and remind ourselves of the Christ within them. In the Baptismal prayers, we pray that this child may be delivered from the way of sin and death. These old brain habits that we have separate us from others and kill any chance that we have of recognizing Jesus when we pass him on the street. But when we take the time to get to know someone, to actually break bread with them, then the mystical thing happens. And instead of disappearing as he did at the dinner table in Emmaus, Jesus appears all around the table, as he does every week with us at the altar rail.

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