

Sermon: April 6, 2008

“The real deal!!”

Over the past 3 years ... having gone “artificial” with my fake knee and hip ... a lot of you ol’ athletes have been asking me ----- “Don ... why don’t you ever preach about basketball anymore???”

OK ---- if must ... I will.

I know you’ve been engrossed in March-madness ... but, honestly ---- the best basketball happens on Sunday afternoons in our own gym: Methodists vs. the Lutherans!!

I have such fond memories of “playground basketball” ...

*The hoop with no net attached to the south-end of a Roseland elementary school.

*The concrete slab next to the pool ... in the ol’ neighborhood park in Glen Ellyn ----- playing there everyday in the summer from dawn ‘til dusk.

I remember when Jude and I went to Ixtapa in Mexico for our honeymoon ... we found a neighborhood basketball court in the next town. I said --- “Jude ... someday I want to play on this court with our kids.”

Well ... two years later we went back with our 4 kids.

I took two deflated basketballs in my luggage ... because I know the universal rule of the playground: “You may be Swedish and lumpy ... but if you bring a new ball to the playground ... YOU WILL PLAY!!” Layla, Aaron, and I played in some 3-on-3 games in that Mexican park. After about an hour ... this big gentle Mexican man escorted us off the court. I asked: “What is going on??”

He smiled: “You just lost your second game ... is it ok if we still use your ball????”

Last Sunday ... in our own church gym ... it was late in the game ... and it was another Methodist-Lutheran thriller. Danny ----- one of our best players, and one who plays with such passion & grace ---- well, he drives to the basket. Out of the corner of his eye ... he sees the “new kid” on our team. The “new kid” isn’t all that good.

He’s not always sure what to do with the ball. But --- he hasn’t touched the ball yet ... and he sometimes wonders if he’s really “part of the team.”

So, instead of scoring himself (and we did need the basket!!) ----- Danny passes the ball to “the new kid.”

The “new kid” shoots ... and misses by a LONG SHOT!!

Next time down the court ... Danny passes to him again --- another miss!!

Next time ... another “next time” ... after the 5th time: *“THE NEW KID PUTS THE BALL IN THE HOOP!!”* *The fans and all his team-mates love it!!*

This is what life is all about.

It’s the “moments” ... it’s the “little things” ----- which, to some people, really aren’t so little.

You see? ----- DANNY HAS A GIFT. Like you ... like me ----- we all have gifts.

One of Danny’s is what he can do with a basketball.

Our calling in life ---- is to “give something back.” Last Sunday ... in the gym ... Danny “gave something back.” He uses his gift of “basketball goodness and grace” to bring joy and purpose to another young kid ... who desperately wants to belong and be accepted.

It’s kind-of like the gospel story for this morning. The disciples meet a “stranger.” It’s not until Jesus *gives something back* (i.e., he breaks bread and shares it with his friends) that the disciples recognize who Jesus is.

It’s in the sharing ... in the giving ... in the “giving back” ----- that the disciples meet the real Jesus!!

Life is about breaking bread ... it’s about taking what you have ...

your deflated basketball ... your loaf of bread ... your gift of music ... your talent on the athletic field ...

the money you’ve accumulated ... your business ... your artist’s brush ... your time & energy ...

DOGGONE IT ----- let’s each take some of what we have and “give some back to the world around us.”

We talk a lot about giving and giving back ... but --- WE DON'T DO IT!!
We've become afraid to give ... afraid we won't have "enough" for ourselves.
We hold back. We look at what's going on ----- our jobs, the price of gas, the war, the people who are supposed to lead us ... we get disappointed, cynical, and very selfish.

I ... like you ... look at the world and wonder.

*I think of truck drivers ... who are afraid to turn the key to their ignition ... because, as soon as they do it, they are already losing money.

*The other day ... on my way to a funeral ... I drive through Blue Island. I see St. Francis Hospital ... are they really serious about closing it??? There is no way we can't keep this place going ... if indeed "we are in this thing called life together."

*I stop to get gas ... and I see a little-old-bent-over lady giving the cashier a wrinkled 5-dollar-bill ... she wants 3 bucks worth of gas. Hardly enough to get to the other side of town.

*Then I go to officiate at the funeral of a 26 year old young man ... who served two stints in Iraq ... had volunteered for a 3rd ... and finished at the top of his class to be a fire-fighter. He dies in a car accident on Sunday. Seeing all the Marines ... flags in hand ... breaking down in tears ----- for a young man who wanted to "give back" to his country, his family, his world.

There is so much in the world ... not making sense.

But ----- there is something that DOES MAKE SENSE.

The 1400 people who work at St. Francis Hospital ... the 1000's of people who see that place as an "oasis of healing" ... the Marines in tears on Thursday afternoon ... somebody's grandma, not having enough money to fill her car with gas ----- WE ARE FAMILY ... "we are in this together."

We are connected.

All we need to do ... to survive, to flourish, to make our "little corner of the kingdom" better ----- we need to take what we have (even if it isn't much!!) ... and we need to share it ... we need to give some back!!

WHAT DO YOU HAVE?

*A story? A struggle? Some extra cash? A little time? A journey?
Are you good at basketball? ... the violin?
Are you the governor? A major player in one of the oil companies?
Are you a soldier? ... a florist? ... running for president??*

Well ----- take your load of bread, no matter how big or small ...
bless it,
break it,
share it.

And ----- when we do this ... when we give-back ... maybe someone will see Jesus ... maybe someone will receive a glimmer of hope ... and, in your giving-back ... you'll help another soul have the guts-and-moxie to wake up tomorrow and try again.

Don Borling
All Saints Lutheran Church
13350 LaGrange Road
Orland Park, IL 60462

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