

CHRISTIAN: MORE THAN A NAME

April 10, 2011

Thousands of dry bones scattered over a vast valley floor. That's the Bible story picture I most remember as a child in church school. It struck me, and stuck with me, much more than the idyllic picture of Jesus with the sheep on the hillside or the one of the children on Jesus' lap; which I found odd because those stories are so much easier to understand. After all, lush hillsides, fluffy sheep, and small children represent life and hope, while bones represent all that is bare and dry and lost and hopeless in our lives. We look at them and think: how can they ever be anything else but brittle bones covered in grit and gone forever?

But what happens in this story we find in Ezekiel? God claps his hand down on Ezekiel's shoulder and asks: *Can these bones live?* We're pretty sure we know the answer to that question – we ask it all the time: can we live with cancer, can we live with loss, can we live without hope, can we live when our bones and souls are dry? Most of the time we don't think so – not for one minute!

But the Lord throws out a challenge to Ezekiel: Prophecy to those scattered, separated, bones – Say to them: **HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD.** Tell the bones that the Lord God says to them: “Hear the Word of the Lord – the Lord will cause breath to enter you and cover you with skin and put breath in you and you shall live and **YOU SHALL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD.**”

Now here's the part where I always got a little distracted...I picture those dry bones jumping up, dancing toward each other, slowly joining together, sinew and muscle, being covered with skin, the eyes opening, the heart pumping – kind of a great joyous rave in the desert! What I often forget – or never thought of because the vision of those dancing bones was so amazing – was that it was the **WORD OF THE LORD** that got the whole thing going! The **WORD**, the **BREATH**, **GOD!** How stunning! God's Word can do **THAT?** And, as a result of this whole thing, God says, “**YOU SHALL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD.**”

Now I don't know about you, but I think it's pretty cool that we have a **LORD** who gets his or her point across this way. It's so much better than a memo or a text or a Facebook posting – and I personally vote for this even over burning bushes. And what a point it is: The Word of the Lord is life...the Word of the Lord makes things happen...the Word of the Lord transforms...the Word of the Lord calls bodies together...the Word of the Lord creates relationship...the Word of the Lord makes community. Paul says: “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” Those bones were nothing without the Word of the Lord, without the breath of God...without the Spirit of the Living One.

So what does that say to us? Are *we* filled with the breath of God...the Spirit of the Living One? Are we *formed and given purpose* by the Word of God?

I often hear people say: Christian is just a name. It's what you do that makes the difference! Well, I heartily beg to differ with the first part of that statement. Christian has never been just a name. Christian is a relationship.

To be a Christian is to be a follower of Christ. To follow is to be in relationship...to have a relationship. To be Christian is to claim not just a name, but a state of being! And that state of being is one that happens because the Word of the Lord enters our lives – and that Word is Jesus the Christ.

This Word – this breath – calls us into community. And make no mistake – this is a community like no other – not because we are in some way elite, or honored, or prestigious, but rather, just the opposite – we are a community like no other because we no longer live by our own claims, our own justifications, our own needs: but by the Word of God in Jesus Christ! We live *in relationship* with Jesus Christ.

And so we must be very careful. We must ask ourselves at every turn: What would the Word of God have us do? How does the Word call us to act? Our behavior is no longer centered on what I want – or what you want – but rather on what the Word is for us...and in that asking we begin to live faithfully in the Christian community...a community where ‘Christian’ becomes more than just a name – but a relationship – with God in Christ, and with one another through Christ.

And the wonder of this community – this fellowship – is that its foundation was laid long before you or I or anyone we have ever known was here. God laid the foundation long before we entered this common life – so *we* enter this fellowship not as demanders – not as those with personal visions that will define the Christian community, for it has already been defined – but we enter it as thankful recipients who seek how God’s Word will lead us, bind us together, make us one, and set us forth in mission. When we understand this, we find that the Word comes to us daily and anew in Jesus Christ. It is a Word that brings, anew, redemption, forgiveness, grace, mercy.

And here the Word is put into our mouths so that we might share it with others. We come here to be struck by the Word so we might enthusiastically speak it to others. We need this Word when we become discouraged and uncertain – for by ourselves we cannot help ourselves. That is the belief and power of the Christian community and the wonderful promise we share with one another. Through Christ, we become Word and spirit and breathe to each other’s dry bones and disconnectedness.

And so we come here as a Christian community – not in name only – but in relationship – we are here surrounded by the things of the Spirit. It is a fellowship which exists because of God in Christ, but thrives because we nurture what is entrusted to us while we are here. We are bound together not by human experiences or similarities, but by faith – by the Word spoken.

And so we also have a great responsibility. If we are to honor the Word among us, if we are to take seriously the relationship we have with one another as Christians in our Union Church community, then we must listen carefully to one another. We must make decisions based on what most closely allows the Word of God to be present and heard and lived. This means we don’t make decisions in light of our own needs, and wants, and agendas. For now the only ‘agenda’ is what brings life; what breathes the Spirit into the outcome; what causes us to dance toward one another so we are joined into one body.

When *we* hear the Word of the Lord we will learn to witness and speak to one another at Union Church and to our world so only peace and justice grow. Feel God’s hand clapping down on

your shoulder – feel God’s presence in your life; hear the *Word of the Lord* in your discerning moments! Amen.

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