

A simple wooden cross is centered on a background of weathered, dark brown wood. The cross is made of two rectangular wooden beams, one vertical and one horizontal, meeting at their centers. The wood grain of the background is prominent, showing concentric growth rings and some surface cracking. The lighting is somewhat uneven, with the right side of the image being darker than the left.

Newmarket Church of Christ
Parish House

Thanks for your willingness to hear about the exciting vision we have as a congregation. We deeply believe that God is at work in our collective life as a community of faith. We're excited about the new ministry initiatives, the stories we're telling, and the direction we're heading as a congregation. With this, we wanted to leave you with a few stories while seeking your interest in partnering with us as we undertake a way of ministry that leads us deeper into the life of God.

On behalf of the Newmarket Church of Christ,

49 Weeks: The Story of Claes

When Claes showed up the first time at church it was for his mother-in-law's funeral. The second time Claes showed up at church was to cook a Thanksgiving feast for the neighbourhood. Claes was trying to give back to the church for everything the church did for his family during the time of his mother-in-law's death. Since the Thanksgiving feast, Claes' interaction with the church has been through shared meals between the neighbourhood and the church.

Often times as Claes is standing in the kitchen cutting onions or making up a salad he's asking questions about what we believe as a church and why we believe. He never promises to show up at church but he always promises to be at the next meal.

On a Thursday afternoon I sent Nicki (Claes' wife) a text asking if she was free the next afternoon to make some salads for the homeless shelter as it was our turn to cook the Friday night meal. Nicki graciously agreed and arrived to put her professional culinary skills to work. Nicki said she could only give us an hour but the hour turned into three hours. Nicki was greeting the guests and serving plates of food to the most vulnerable members of society. When Claes arrived he looked around and smiled. Then he turned towards me and said, *"I need to know about every meal that this church is going to eat or serve because I am the church's chef and I need to know so I can schedule my life to prepare the food on behalf of the church."*

As the evening drew to a close, Claes and I promised to share the gift of food in our homes with one another. Nicki and Claes left to go home. We finish serving the meal and we too went home. Then Sunday happened. Fifteen minutes before worship Claes walks into worship with his four year-old son.

"Hey."

"Hey. Thought we might see what happens here on a Sunday morning."

I pick my jaw up off the floor. It took Claes 49 weeks to feel comfortable enough to walk into a worship service for the first time in his life.

It just happened to be that after worship we were heading to the local park to share lunch as a congregation. Claes received the invitation and arrived at the park. While we're sitting down in the pavilion and waiting for the corn on the cob to boil I ask Claes, *"So, what happened in worship? What did you see? What questions might you have after this experience?"*

Claes thought about this for what seemed to be a long time. Then he gave the following answer,

“I can’t figure out why each of you chose to share each other’s burdens. You sang some songs I didn’t know; you read words from the Bible; you shared some stories (which were really good), and then afterwards the church people took turns sharing their burdens—a mother who died, a friend with cancer, a son on drugs—I can’t figure out why you chose to share these burdens and why you want to carry each other’s burdens.”

Now it was my turn to think of what to say. And soon afterwards I simply said, *“Hope. Hope that God can save us in every way we need to be saved. That’s why we share our burdens and that’s why we help carry each other’s burdens.”*

Now we wait . . . we wait to see what happens with Claes and his life in God . . . and while waiting we’ll keep sharing the table together. In fact, three more weeks and the neighbourhood and church will join each other at a Thanksgiving feast, prepared by Claes and Nicki.

Hugs In the Parking Lot

I'm walking over to Tim's to meet a young man that is going to be baptized. In the parking lot I see Meaghan with her long dark red hair. I call out, "*Hey red.*" She turns and smiles and says, "*Hey preacher.*" I first met Meaghan when she was in one of the lowest valleys of her life. In our first meeting Meaghan was standing on the stairs of the church afraid and in tears. Her friends were talking a thousand words a minute. They knew we were a church that loved the neighbourhood and they were asking us to help Meaghan. So we made sure Meaghan had food and ever since, Meaghan gives thanks to God on our behalf.

While talking to Meaghan, a mom with two children, working a minimum wage job arrives beside me.

"I need to give you a hug?"

"What for?"

"For the bread that fed my family; you don't know how much we needed that bread."

After a quick cup of coffee I walk over to a friend's house. In my friend's house lives nine people; nine people jammed into a 1200 square foot house. I tell my friend thanks for delivering the bread to families in need. My act of gratitude is brushed aside. Just as quick as the act of gratitude is brushed aside, I am asked,

"Can we do it again? Lots of families need food. See Joan across the court, her and her husband have three kids, he's working sixty hours a week, she's raising those children by herself—yet they can hardly have enough food—we'll give them bread! See that family over there? The landlord is an ass. The furnace broke and he told them to buy space heaters. They spent the whole winter heating the house on space heaters. We'll feed them too. You got time? I will tell you more stories of how we will feed those who need bread."

While listening to these words, the story of a little boy holding some loaves of bread and a few fish is remembered. In this story Peter asks, "*How can such a little amount of bread feed such a large crowd of people?*" Jesus smiles and takes the bread and feeds those who are hungry.

The Shooting Death of Cody

I flew into the airport on a Sunday evening. I arrived at my car and turned on 680 News to listen to the traffic report. One of the first news reports I heard was a shooting that left a 30 year old man dead in the Yonge & Davis area. I instinctively knew the shooting took place in the church's neighbourhood.

The next day I arrived at Maple Leaf Public School to deliver the sandwiches we make for children who arrive at school hungry. We've made several thousand sandwiches over the years. The Vice Principle saw me walk in and immediately asked if I could join her and others in the office. I was asked if I knew about the shooting and who the victim was. I said I heard about the shooting but didn't know any details. That's when I was informed that it was Shelly's partner who was murdered. I caught my breath. This is going to be hard to hear.

Shelly is the daughter of Jenny. Jenny is a "person of peace" (Luke 10). Jenny has hosted a garage sale on behalf of the church for the last two years, organized a street BBQ with the church, worshipped with us on occasion, sends her two grandchildren to our summer camp and is a participant in our monthly neighbourhood meals. In fact, it was Jenny's niece who cooked our Thanksgiving turkey and ham for us at the last neighbourhood meal. And Shelly . . . Shelly has shared her life with us at the street BBQ, shared in our summer camp BBQ's, and speaks highly of what this church does in her neighbourhood to anyone who has ears to hear.

The admin staff and I discussed how best to support Jenny and the family. I left the office and called Jenny. There was nothing but tears on the other end of the line. I am to stop by their house in the afternoon.

Making my way back to my office I am asking myself several questions:

- If the gospel is good news . . . how do I speak gospel to Shelly who must bury her partner that is now murdered?
- If the gospel is good news how do we as a church help Jenny and the family find healing in the name of Jesus?

Leslie Newbigin writes the church is the hermeneutic of the gospel. Meaning, when the world sees the church they must see gospel. Thus, in the midst of a shooting where one is gunned down, how can we be a church where the neighbourhood sees peace, forgiveness, and healing in the name of Jesus? What kind of church do we need to be so that our neighbours can see the gospel? How do we live among our neighbours so that our neighbours can see and experience the kingdom of God come near?

The Gift of Friendship: Kenny's Story

I first met Ken in the coffee shop when he drove taxi. Ken would arrive with a Bluetooth device in his ear and make the rounds of the coffee shop. He grew up in Newmarket, or just outside of Newmarket his whole life so he knows all the old timers and since he drives taxi, he knows all the locals as well. I should say, he knows all the locals who depend upon a taxi to make it to their doctor's appointments, grocery stores, or even those who need to be picked up from the bar late Friday night or in the early hours of Saturday morning.

One Sunday afternoon I was hosting a church BBQ in my backyard. Katie was busy inside the house with some ladies preparing the salads. The children were destroying my well-manicured lawn. The men were either busy pouring drinks for one another or being bossed around from their wives as to where to set up tables and chairs. As I was busy lighting the gas BBQ, I hear a commotion out front. It's Ken and three other "neighborhood" friends: Adam, Melissa and Destiny. The four of them arrived bearing gifts of drinks and salads. I watch Ken survey the backyard and he sees me near the BBQ. His less than five foot body marches over to the BBQ and pushes me out of the way and says, "*I will cook for the people today.*" To lift the lid fully Ken has to stand on his tip toes and throw the lid back. Once it's open he cannot close it. I stand nearby to close the lid when he needs me too.

I stand at the BBQ listening to Ken tell stories of being a chef before driving taxi. He was the best chef in town according to his stories. I watch as the flames darken the sausages and hamburgers. He doesn't mind; the best sausage is a sausage that is charred black. Ken loads up the tray my wife brings to us; she looks at the fire leaping over the lid of the BBQ and looks at me with quizzical eyes. I turn my back and gather everyone's attention. It's time for a prayer. The children grow quiet, my neighbors across the fence—they too grow quiet as they drink their beer and wonder about their strange neighbor whom they just discover is a "religious man." All of a sudden, CRASH! I look back and Ken has knocked over all the sausages and hamburgers onto the grass and the patio stones. "*No problem*" he yells. He picks up the charred meat, places it back on the grill, doses the meat with water to wash off the grit, and places the meat back on the platter. On the menu today will be charred meat with grits of sand. For many of the church people, this is the first physical introduction to Ken. He has never been inside our building. The church simply knows Ken because we have been praying for him on various occasions in our worship service.

On another occasion, this time a church picnic in a rented park, we pull up with the BBQ and Ken is the first to push everyone out of the way. He wants to try his cooking skills again. He grabs the tongs and the raw meat; he throws the meat onto the grill, wipes the sweat from his forehead and then proceeds to tell everyone that he will shuck the corn. We kindly say that he should keep to grilling.

Ken is now a permanent fixture on Sunday morning worship. He is usually one of the first to arrive. He walks in through the back door, wants to make sure the sound system works properly, and is there to greet everyone as they walk through the doors. Ken has become one of our missionaries even though he himself would object to being called this. Ken speaks about God every morning in the coffee shop. He tells a group of men who meet at Tim Horton's every morning at 9:30 what happened at church, what is going to happen, and how we as a church have been praying for them. This group of men listen and when I arrive for my morning coffee, they always ask,

"Is it true the church prays for us?"

"Yes."

"Good, please keep on praying for us."

On this particular Sunday morning Ken walks in carrying a homemade loaf of banana bread. The loaf of bread is placed in the fridge. We gather for worship. We gather around the Lord's Table of bread and wine. We have our lives centered in and through the Word. We pray for the neighborhood and we are sent to live our worship in the world. We then gather around a coffee table where most Sunday's the coffee is bearable. Ken disappears and brings his homemade loaf of banana bread from the basement fridge. He breaks the loaf into pieces and leaves it on the table. A single loaf won't feed the crowd but the strangest thing happened; all who wanted a piece of bread managed to find there was always bread on the table.

At the Bar On A Sunday Evening

A couple of years ago Scott lost both his parents within a short span of time. Because of their death he has grown to be angry with God. Debbie, Scott's wife, is living with terminal cancer. One Sunday a few months ago they showed up in worship and their experience left them with no reason to show back up. Debbie was ready to give up on church. Scott however convinced Debbie that maybe it was a bad Sunday and they should give the church another chance. The next Sunday Scott & Debbie showed up for worship and for whatever reason, they sensed the presence of God.

Soon after their arrival I sat with them in the local coffee shop only to hear Debbie say, *"We need a church to care for us as I die of cancer. I need a church who will love me till the day I die."*

Checking my messages late into the night I see Scott has organized a birthday party for Debbie at the local bar on Sunday evening. I'm invited. It will be Debbie's last birthday.

Showing up at the bar on Sunday evening Scott greets me outside with a firm handshake: *"Grab a drink at the bar."*

Walking into the bar I see Debbie. She walks over to hug me and with her strained and tired voice becomes the host; I am welcomed to her birthday party. She looks up and sees some friends and family singing karaoke and laughing. She points to each person and tells me something about each person who has arrived and what she most appreciates about each person.

After introductions to some people I spot Mark. I know Mark because his daughter has spent the last five years attending the church's summer camp. I know Mark from a street BBQ a couple of years ago. I suspect Mark suffers from some sort of mental disorder. Tonight Mark is wearing a large cowboy hat that seems too big for his head. Mark's graying hair holding the cowboy hat in place reaches down to his shoulders.

What's the preacher doing in a bar? Sometimes the gospel of Jesus calls people to inhabit places they would otherwise find ways to avoid. When David Lipscomb, a wealthy land owner in Nashville, TN discovered the outbreak of cholera in 1873 had killed over 500 people in the month of June alone, he traveled into the hardest hit regions of the cholera epidemic and bathed and fed the sick and dying.¹ Mother Teresa left the safety of her convent and roamed the streets of Calcutta, India picking up the dying bodies and bringing them into the convent. An older couple walks into the neighbor's house that is

¹ Richard Hughes, "Dare We Live in the World Imagined in the Sermon on the Mount?" in *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount*, edited by David Fleer and Dave Bland (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 53.

dirty and filled with garbage so they can pick up the dirty laundry of the children next door and return the clothes cleaned.

Why? Why would Lipscomb enter into the hardest hit regions of a cholera outbreak? Why would Mother Teresa roam the streets of Calcutta, India looking for the sick and dying? Why would an older couple walk into a filthy and disgusting house? Because sometimes the gospel of Jesus calls people to inhabit places we would otherwise avoid.

Peter inhabits the home of a gentile named Cornelius. Philemon visits the slave quarters where Onesimus lives. The wealthy Christians of Corinth are sharing a meal with the impoverished Christians of Corinth. Paul stands before the Roman emperor. Disciples of Jesus create a space of hospitality for the stranger. The twelve apostles sit down for a meal with a woman. The gospel of Jesus pushes the people of God to inhabit places we would otherwise avoid.

That's why I find myself in a bar on a Sunday night. Debbie is dying of cancer. I want to spend as much time with her so in the name of Jesus I can speak a word of hope. I want to be in Scott's life so that he knows when the dark night of the soul takes place there are those who will walk alongside him holding up the light of Christ to guide us through the darkness.

Seeing Mark off to the side I take my drink and sit down across from him. Ten minutes into the conversation Mark is confessing his sins. A friend of Mark's, sitting down with us, also starts confessing his sins. Soon after a co-worker of Scott's starts telling me about how miserable her life is.

I was only expecting to stop in and have a drink and wish Debbie a happy birthday. I was not expecting to be a priest receiving the confession of sins.

After a time of confession I am asked why we as a church find a way to be friends with the neighbourhood. That's when I start preaching:

Let me tell you some good news. I am convinced this world is broken, bruised, beaten up and filled with violence (they all shake their head in agreement and interject the sermon with stories of how the neighbourhood is broken, bruised, beaten up and filled with violence). But it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, there is a God who loves this broken, beaten up, violent filled world deeply and he wants to see a world of justice, healing, equality. He loves this world so deeply that he's even willing to die for this world. And those of us who believe in the God who loves this world deeply and who are followers of Jesus are called to share in God's healing of this world; we are called to share in God's salvation that is experienced when the blind see, the lame can walk again, the ones mourning can find laughter again.

You ask me why we are a church that finds a way to be friends with the neighborhood. We are friends with the neighbourhood because we are convinced that we are sharing in God's salvation. We are convinced that God is using us in ways we don't quite know or understand to bear witness to how God is healing the broken, bruised, beaten up and violent filled world and neighbourhood.

On the table are some chicken wings and a pitcher of cold beer. The chicken wings are passed to each person and each person is poured a drink. For some strange reason all that I could hear as the chicken wings are passed around and drinks are being poured are the words I heard in our morning worship, "Do this in remembrance of me."

A Partnership

We have a vision of inviting a family to live in the neighbourhood with the intention of connecting the church and the neighbourhood in the name of Jesus. This is an audacious vision that grows out of the ministry we have been engaged in over the last decade. There are still lots of details to work out on our end.

We are planning to invest a lot of time and financial funds over the next several months to make this ministry possible. Given that we need to invest time and finances, we can only do so if we know there are interested congregations and individuals willing to partner with us. Thus, we are asking,

1. Pray for us. Pray that we might have wisdom to engage such a vision.
2. Consider the option of partnering with us through a variety of options: prayer partners, volunteers, trusted voices of guidance, etc.
3. After we finish informing congregations and individuals about this ministry, we will seek financial partners. Please consider, on a congregation level and also an individual level, to become a financial partner. We will be looking for a three year commitment from financial partners.

A quarterly newsletter will be created to provide updates for congregations and individuals. If you are interested in receiving these updates, please keep in touch with us. We look forward to hearing from you.

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