

“The Gospel According to Tim Hortons”
A Sermon preached by
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St. Matthew’s Church
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Scripture: Acts 4: 32-35

I heard a story this week of a couple who were sitting down to enjoy a cup of coffee in the afternoon when the husband took a sip and spit it out saying, “Yuck! This coffee tastes like dirt.” “That’s no surprise,” replied his wife without missing a beat, “it was *ground* this morning.”

Where would we be without coffee, eh? It’s hard to imagine a church without coffee either isn’t it? Bible Scholars suggest that coffee, first developed in China and chewed as a bean in Ethiopia was possibly introduced to Israel by the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon. It is quite likely in the days of the early church they were brewing up Starbuck’s special Jehovah Java blend in Jerusalem but I can’t say for sure whether the tradition of those little sandwiches without crusts had taken off yet!

Imagine that scene from today’s bible reading of the early church, gathered in someone’s home, praising God, testifying to the risen Christ and pooling their resources to help the poor and needy. The Bible says the early church community was of one heart and mind. Really? Well, we know that doesn’t last. If you had the opportunity to join with us at Eastminster Church at our last joint United Church Sunday evening worship services you heard me preach a sermon entitled, “The Worst Church Board Meeting Ever” where we explored the story that follows today’s reading of Ananias and Sapphira who cheat the early church and fall dead at a board meeting as a result! So while all was not well it was certainly a powerful time in our church history.

The church provided for its members what some call “the third place.” That is, beyond work and home, a place to gather where you have meaningful relationships (with God and brothers and sisters in Christ), share life, food and service to the community. The church today continues to be a “third place” between work and home but many of our members will recall a time years ago when the church played a more prominent role as the “third place.” Not just as a worshipping community but as a place for meals, sports, civic functions and so forth. Today, however, the church no longer plays that key role as the communities “third place” with the exception of rural Canadian contexts.

So, in the words of Cheers, where do folks go today “where everybody knows your name?” May I suggest the Holy Church of St. Timothy of All Hortons? Yes, Tim Horton’s does seem to be that “third place” for many people where they gather for community, relationships, the sacraments of Coffee and Tim Bits, where they feel a sense of belonging and identity. Now, I say this in a teasing manner (as you are used to now at St. Matt’s) because I too love Timmy’s. But would you not agree that many folks in our

community today turn to Tim's for a sense of belonging beyond home and work instead of the church?

I've been reading a really book this week that was a birthday gift from a friend of mine who is a pastor and is working on his Doctorate at Drew University in New Jersey. Drew's professor of Evangelism is Leonard Sweet who recently published an interesting work entitled, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*.

In this book Sweet suggests that Starbucks in America (and does throw a bone acknowledging that his Canadian friends always rave about Tim Hortons instead) provides the community and experience that many have formerly found in church. He suggests that we have much to learn from the coffeehouse context and offers as a guide the following description of the EPIC life:

Experiential
Participatory
Image-rich
Connecting

It certainly is easy to think of Tim Hortons as a "third place" that offers a unique experience. After all, imagine going to a Tim Hortons but not ordering a coffee or a donut. It wouldn't be the same, would it?

Well, going to a church but not experiencing worship would be a little bit like walking into a Timmy's and not ordering something to enjoy. Worship is the main gathering time for the community of faith and it provides the opportunity for people to experience God's grace. During Holy Week we were treated to a great sermon by Rev. Maurice about his desire years ago not just to hear the stories of God but to encounter God himself. Maurice told the story of being caught outside in a Manitoba blizzard in the 1950s and in the midst of fear and panic very clearly heard the voice of Jesus say, "I am with you always." This direct experience of Christ calmed him down, he went to sleep (which prairie kids like myself know you are not supposed to do in a snowbank) and woke in the hospital alive and just a little chilly. In fact, national newspapers picked up the story with headlines like "Rookie pastor gets cold feet." Don't we all yearn for a direct experience of God like Maurice had? As Leonard Sweet argues ultimately we must decide whether life is all about a God who is to be experienced or a belief to be remembered?

Tim Hortons as a third place offers you the opportunity to participate in a unique culture with its own rituals and language. Our church secretary Sandy told me the story this week of her husband Lance going into one of the first Tim's to open in New York State. Lance walked up to the counter and ordered a "double-double" and only received blank stares from the American teenagers across the counter. It required the Canadian training manger in the background to interpret for the young workers that this customer wanted a double cream/double sugar coffee! Who would have thought that Timmy's has its own language. You can also participate by rolling up the rim to win as we saw in our

Kingdom's Kids children's time this morning and for real die hards you can even buy stock in the public company.

The church as a third place offers its own way of participating including its own unique language of grace, peace, faith, hope and love. For newcomers to the church, and some long time members this requires some translation on our part. The church also offers people the opportunity to roll up their sleeves (instead of the rim) and serve the community and church from music to meals, study groups to service opportunities like our food bank ministry. Ultimately the most effective congregations I've witnessed throughout the years are the ones where individual members understand that they have a personal stake in the ministry of the church and are willing to invest in the future of the church.

Needless to say Tim Hortons, like Starbucks, is image-rich. You can go into a Tim's from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island and see the same symbols and rituals taking place. From a steeped tea in Cornerbrook to a Tim Bit box in Victoria there is consistency and a clear branding that takes place. The church has its own symbols, of course, and even the United Church has its own symbols. I was flipping through some church mail the other day and my daughter Emily grabbed a sheet, pointed at the United Church crest, and having seen the UCC crest on St. Matthew's doors for most of her life smiled and said, "Daddy's church." We have symbols in common with other church's don't we? The Bible, the Communion Table, the cross, our beautiful stained glass windows all point towards the story of salvation we have to share.

I think the most important part of this EPIC life, however, is the last part – Connection. Coffee gathers people in a way like no other activity. I was reading a quote this week that reminded me that people always say, "Let's get together for coffee" rather than "Let's stay apart for coffee" don't they? Coffee brings folks together and all you have to do is walk into a Tim Hortons and see how people are drawn into conversation and fellowship over coffee

We know that the church exists to offer relationships to folks with God in Christ and one another. In order to help make this happen churches need reputations where strangers are welcomed and all can enter to find God and community. In our testimony time this morning we've been so blessed to hear from Margaret and Hal about how this church feels like home and its where they encounter the risen Christ through ordinary folks who gather week by week and work for the Kingdom of God. If you're new here today and looking for a third place between work and home I'd like to personally invite you to join with us at St. Matthew's during this Easter season. I believe this is the best place in our community for you to experience God's grace, participate in the ministry of Christ, draw real strength from the symbols and images of faith, and connect with God and ordinary folks who are trying their best to live a faithful life that will make a difference in the world.

For this day, as we gather in the season of Easter:

The One who was raised to new life on the third day offers us this third place as a source of new life and blessing

The one who rolled away the stone now invites to roll up our sleeves and win others to walk the path of peace and justice

The one who defeated the brutal power of death now stands ready to brew up something strong and bold in your life this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.