



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**“The Gift We All Have”**

**1 Corinthians 13**

**Will Sparks**

**February 3, 2013**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Anybody have any personal stories of their brush with greatness. Somebody told me once of meeting Robin Williams in a Hotel elevator and said, “He’s just a little guy.” A brush with greatness. I heard the story of a young 14 year old on the radio recounting how he had spent a couple of hours with John Lennon when he was in Toronto for the legendary press conference from their bed. Everybody has their person that they would love to meet in person. For most people it is a world leader or sports figure or some celebrity or dignitary. I guess it should surprise nobody that for me it would be a preacher.

Well last weekend I had the chance to hear one of the great American preachers of the 20th century. You may well not have heard of Fred Craddock but given the opportunity to hear him preach you would call him a great one. But it was not his eloquence and turn of phrase that has stuck with me. Rather it is the way he talked about the church as a cluster of simple, struggling ordinary people with an extra-ordinary gift- kinship.

Fred told the story of being invited by another great American preacher and social activist of the 20th century William Sloan Coffin to preach at Riverside church in New York City. This is one of the most prestigious pulpits in North American, and yet to hear Fred talk about it you would think that he had been invited by his brother to come over for coffee. It was as natural for these two to exchange the good news as it is for you and I to exchange our daily news.

Coffin was away for the weekend and had invited Fred to stay at his place. It was during one of the times in his life when Coffin was a bachelor, and his apartment was a mess. As he arrived Fred noticed a paper on the floor with an arrow pointing in one direction with the word Bedroom on it. Another page with an arrow labeled the bathroom, and a third sent him in the direction of the kitchen. And on the door of the fridge was a large note saying, “Fred. You will find no food behind this door, but if you want breakfast, go join in the breakfast at the church.”

The story is longer and more involved than that, but the enduring impression this story gave me was of two men having become great preachers of America who remained simple human beings in each other’s eyes. Simple fallible human beings with messy apartments and empty fridges. The community of Christ includes remarkable human beings. This church here, Northwood, filled with individuals with amazing lives and gifts. And at the same time, when we wake up in the morning or go to bed at night we are utterly the same, simply human, born in vulnerability, we breathe the same breath, and ultimately as we lay our head on the pillow at night and close our eyes in sleep, no matter who we are we rest in the hands of God. This is the source of our deepest kinship divinely forged. And it is to that deep kinship to which Paul is pointing to the church in Corinth.

Paul is dealing with a divisive community. In chapter one of this letter, Paul says that he has heard tell that there are divisions and disagreements in the community. They argue over a dazzling array of issues: from communion to sexuality, from money to who is allowed to do what. It would appear that they have lost touch with what Fred Craddock and Bill Coffin could see in each other- their basic, ultimate, vulnerable naked humanity before God. And having tried to remind them of this in a myriad of ways Paul finally gets to the core of his message to them...

“Though I may speak with the tongues of mortals ...  
...the greatest of these is love.”

At the very foundation of every life, every relationship, every community, anything that lasts there will need to be the Spirit of God, the love of God which forges the deep connection beneath it all. All the rest is dross, chaff, blown away on the winds of adversity. But the deeper kinship, that is the stuff that transcends differences and lasts forever. The reason Jesus got in trouble in his own home town is because he claimed that this good news he brought and the healing that came with it was meant for more than just the home town crowd. In fact their designs on a privileged place in the Kingdom of God had become a stumbling block to experiencing the genuine good news. They had replaced the universal love of God, the deeper kinship with a lighter, easier kinship of hometown Nazareth pride. But Jesus says that the good news knows no such nationality.

So here's the call- to Christian community, but by that I mean a quality of kinship that is deep and universal but that can be experienced right here, right now. It is a quality of humble love that is only possible when you know deep in your heart that you are just another human being whose life is given by God, who is on a relatively short sojourn on this earth and so while you are here you'd better be real. We've only got so much time and God only knows how much that is so in this moment, which is all the time we know, we'd better make it count and if we are going to make it count let's make it count for love.

I remember when I had my appendix out, but before that when I was lying on that slab of granite in the emergency for a night and feeling absolutely wretched, in significant pain and nausea. I was wearing a hospital gown which requires constant attention if it is going to cover you up, but at that time, I didn't care. There were a lot of things I didn't care about. And there was something quite freeing about that.

I'm sitting in the lobby of the place my grandmother has moved into- her 6th move in as many years. I am waiting for her to come down for supper. She has invited me to dinner in the dining room of this care facility. And as I watch I see Ben moving across from the elevator to his table pushing one of those aluminum walkers with the wheels on the front legs and the rubber ends on the back legs so that with every step there is a lift-move-place, and if he gets the hang of it, he won't do what every single person in this place fears the most, falling and breaking a hip. This former Alcan executive is making his way across the floor to his table where he is greeted by an angel who sees the effort it took him to get across the floor, smiles into his vulnerable eyes and moves his chair to make it easier for him to sit down. I see Margaret having come out of the smoking room also moving toward the dining room. Her feet propel her in her wheelchair. She has that new-hair-done look because it is Tuesday and the hairdresser came. She is one of the people here who spent her life on the prairie during the depression and the idea of having her hair done every week is something she thought was reserved only for Queen Elizabeth herself. And I smile because she is just so real, like a child finding joy in the smallest thing. And I see my grandma emerging from behind the birdcage, little woman making her way through this final phase of her life. Sometimes I find it easier to see the bear humanity of these other people I don't know as well. We have history. But she is just like the rest, and indeed just like me, and there is an exquisite freedom in that. We're down to the essentials here, and the only essential in any given moment is that deeper kinship, divinely forged. That is all we ever have really. All else will come and go. Know this, and you will truly be alive. Amen