



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Wrestling the gods: I scarce can take it in ”

John 3:14-21

Will Sparks March 15, 2015

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.

Have I ever told you the story of the binding of the cat? I first read it in one of the books of the late great Jesuit Anthony DeMello. There was a community that would meet weekly and one Sunday a cat wandered in and just settled in under one of the pews. Nobody thought much of it, being the friendly, welcoming community that they were. People thought it was kind of charming, so after church the cat went on its way and the chatter was of how cute the cat was. Well lo and behold the next Sunday, the cat showed up again. Curled up under the same pew near the front, just in front of the choir. The kids loved it. Even the dog lovers had to admit, it was charming.

Well Soon the cat became a regular, was even around during the week. She kind of moved in. They set up food and water dishes. She got familiar with the space and would wander around during the service, which was fine at first. But over time some were saying that at least during the service is was kind of distracting. She would jump up on the pulpit during the sermon, had to be shooed away from the communion table. It was becoming a problem.

But they loved her, so they decided that they needed to get a collar, and put her on a leash during worship so that she wouldn't roam so much. There was some discussion whether this was a worship committee issue or a board issue. But finally one of the people who really liked her just went out and got a leash and collar, and took responsibility to leash her every Sunday. When she was away she would make sure one of her friends would do it, and everything was fine.

The cat was there for years, grew up with the children in the church. So one day when the cat finally died, the people were genuinely sad. The cat was a member of the family. They talked about it, and decided to get another cat. You know, there are dog families and cat families? This church had become a cat family. Unfortunately the new cat that they got came with kitten energy. She was lovely, but really distracting, would climb the curtains. One day she got stuck up in the rafters and they had to get a ladder and lift her down in the middle of a service.

So they decided that she had to be put into a room off the side of the sanctuary, which worked just fine. It became routine. They had someone designated at the beginning of the service, to take the cat to her room, and at the end of the service, go and let her out. It became part of their ritual. The service would pause while the cat was placed and the candle was lit. Some people were better than others at confining the cat, so they had designated cat people.

Then one day nobody with experience with the cat was there and the cat didn't like it. So they set us a roster and had certain ways you would treat the cat as you put her in her room. They created a policy. Even the denomination had to be asked if there was denominational policy on the treatment of church cats. Theologians got involved- after all, cats are God's children too. Papers were written on the subject, ministers were trained and over time it became clear. You couldn't hold a service properly without having first done the ritual confining of the cat.

You see rituals, practices, and theologies evolve. Anybody ever seen this guy. He shows up at all kinds of sporting events with his sign that says simply John 3:16. That's it. Do you know what it means? It is this practice of putting John 3:16 in front of people as if that says it all. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.” God so loved the world that we have Jesus. But that is just the

start. What do we believe about Jesus? How is it that he makes the difference? We in the United Church have a bit of a reputation among Christians for being light on sin, uncertain about the cross and its significance, wishy-washy about Jesus. And that is because when someone says, "Jesus died for your sins," there is something in many of us which thinks, really? Is the significance of Jesus that he died? Not that he lived? Not what he taught? Not what he said and did? Is it really that he died? What is the significance of Jesus? I believe that some of the things that are believed and claimed about Jesus are at the core of the gospel, and some of them are like the cat: habits, ways of talking, turns of phrase that we have just gotten used to, but don't speak to the heart of what Jesus is about. And sometimes they get us right off track.

At a choir practice some weeks ago we were trying to pick a "Good Friday" anthem. Often our theological issues come out in the music we sing. And I thought, wow! That is a beautiful piece of music but I don't believe any of the words. I find myself in that dilemma whenever we sing "How Great Thou Art" too- just the third verse. "And when I think that God, his son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in. That on the cross, my burdens gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin." That is one particular answer to the question, "what is the significance of Jesus?" It is called substitutionary atonement, and it didn't exist for the first 1000 years of Christian history. A guy named Anselm came up with it, and basically is says that God's justice requires a punishment or payment for human sin. And without that, we are not right with God. It goes on to say that a sacrificial payment was made by Jesus on the cross. Jesus stepped in to take the full weight of God's punishment for all humanity. He is our substitute. Friends, like the ritual confining of the cat, this "Jesus died for my sin" theology has gotten out of hand, out of proportion, has taken us down a theological side road, and missed what I believe is the real significance of Jesus.

You see, I can't square a loving God, with a God that would require the brutal execution of his son. That is not my understanding of God, and I don't believe that is the significance of Jesus. However, the cross is a central symbol of my faith even without this sacrifice theology. For me, Jesus was a human being who so deeply embodied the love to which we are all called, so deeply revealed the light of God that it so threatened the powers of greed and self-interest and control that they killed him- not because God needed that to happen, but because the love he embodied threatened their power. The cross is what happens when we fully embrace, and fully commit ourselves to the radical love of God, as Jesus does- it's threatening. To me the cross is a constant reminder that the radical love of God can sometimes, even often cost us dearly.

But the cross is empty. The story does not end with the cross. No there is more. God does not leave it there. Suffering and death may come but as in Jesus, God will see us through, and death is not the final chapter. In love there is a power greater than suffering and death. I have seen it. I have seen it as people face death, and there is a sense that people die but love doesn't. We have seen it in the courageous lives of people like Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Oscar Romero, Terry Fox and so many others who refuse to let death have ultimate power over them. There is something eternally significant about their and our refusal to let the crosses we have to bear have the last word in our lives. I have seen it every time a person refuses to give up on the power of love in their life.

How great thou art? Absolutely! I scarce can take in the greatness of God. But it has nothing to do with a sacrificial sin offering. I have tried to re-write the third verse of How Great Thou Art, but I am still not satisfied. Here's the first draft:

And when I think of God, generously sharing this life with us, I scarce can take it in. Even the cross will not deter loves bearing. He lived and died that love might live again.

"What's up with this Jesus dying on the cross business?" For me it is about the power of love in the face of suffering and death. It is about the courage to say, not my will but thy will be done, and about God's victory of love. Amen