



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Cleaning House: The way of letting go"

Luke 4:1-13

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February 14, 2016

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

I am not sure if I have ever told you about my shop. Treena kids me that when we bought the house we are in right now, we had a couple of key things that we didn't want, an inadequate kitchen and a steep driveway. But somehow in the chaos of buying a house we ended up with an inadequate kitchen and a steep driveway... but it has a shop. How did that happen?

I love my shop. I have all my tools in there, and I love it when they are all in their places and I can stand at my bench with good lighting, and reach for any tool with just one step. I love to know where everything is. I love having a project on the go. It is a happy day when I can work down there with CBC radio going.

But for all my love of it, my shop is rarely is a state of order. Somehow the tools migrate to places they don't belong, piles of flotsam and jetsam just accumulates in my shop. Often my bench has only a small work space in the middle clear enough to do anything on. How does that happen? How do tools migrate? How do repair projects pile up and gather dust. It just seems to happen, even though I love my shop.

And truth be told, it's not just my shop. Have you been in my office lately, my garage, my computer bag, my car? So easily, things accumulate, and life becomes awkward, burdened. Jesus' words "Take nothing for the journey--no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt." They seem like a dream. How does this happen: to a shop, to a home, to a life we love and believe in? I think it is time to clean house. It is time to get down to the basics, the essentials.

Welcome to the season of Lent, the once a year season of fasting, reflection and re-evaluation, and the image that came to mind as I was contemplating our Lenten theme for this year is house cleaning. What if we spent the six weeks that lead up to Holy Week and Easter looking closely at the things we need to let go of in order to live the life we feel called to live, in order to, as the song puts it, "clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we may see all the things that really matter, be at peace and simply be." Imagine a season in which we look at what has accumulated in our hearts and minds, and engage in a practice of letting go: of our need to make something of ourselves, of images of ourselves and voices in our heads that only diminish us, of the illusion that we will live forever, and embrace our mortality, of illusions of how life will be so that we can just embrace the life that is. What if we did a spiritual house cleaning? I wonder what it would feel like as we approach Easter and the core story of our faith. Would we be more receptive to its transforming power, ready to embrace and follow the way of Christ, lighter on our feet and more able to love the life we have- pour it out for the world?

Because that is what is at stake for Jesus in the desert- his readiness, and willingness to live the life God has called him to. He is being tested. He has received an amazing blessing: "You are my beloved, in you I am well pleased." And immediately he is led out to the wilderness. He couldn't just go from this blessing straight into this ministry. No first he needed to be alone, to let it all sink in, to be alone with the words he had heard, to let his mission, his calling, his life settle in his soul.

But that is not an easy process. He is tested, challenged. "If you are so beloved of God, use your power to feed your hunger. Turn these stones to bread. Relieve your discomfort. You

deserve a break today.” It is tempting to get distracted by discomfort. And Jesus responds, as important as bread may be, my comfort is not what this is about. Yes, I am hungry, but I will let that go for now. There are more important things at stake here. My life is sustained by more than bread.

Ok, then if you are so beloved, come with me to the top of the mountain. See all the kingdoms of the world. If you are so beloved, you could have it all. It could all be yours. I could give it to you, for you. Let it be for you, not for God. The world could revolve around you. You could have it all. You, You, You... It is tempting to make it all about us, to think we could be self-made, and self-satisfied, to let the ego take the wheel. But Jesus says, No, it is not about me. Let go of that self-centered way. My life is about something bigger than me.

And then the final test. Are you really so beloved? Really? If that is the case, put it to the test. Throw yourself off this tower. You keep quoting scripture. Well here’s a quote for you. God will raise you up on eagles’ wings. Try it. See what happens. Don’t just trust God. Test God... If you are so beloved.

But Jesus refuses. No, my life is not a game. My relationship with God is not to be trifled with. It is a relationship of trust. And as I walk the path I walk, I will need to trust. I need to let go of it all and trust the one who has said, you are my beloved.

This is a great story to begin our Lenten journey, because the season of Lent is all about sinking in to the calling of our life, letting go of everything else which distracts us from that life. Traditionally it is a time when we step back and reflect on our life, re-evaluate, re-adjust the settings of our faith and life. At best, lent is a time to step back and recognize the many forces drawing us away from our God who claims us as beloved. Lent serves as a time of decluttering, and refocusing.

I saw a cartoon a while ago of a minister who was standing on a polished marble floor that glistened like a mirror. There was a majestic stained glass window behind him. He stood, with his chest puffed up in regal pose. On his shoulders was a cape lined in white fur, and stitched in silk all down the flowing edge that trailed out behind him. On his head was a crown studded with gems and jewels sparkling in the light. And he was talking with a sheepish looking parishioner saying, “Now Farnsworth, what’s all this nonsense about me having lost touch with the congregation?” We can lose touch with what is truly life giving. Our lives can accumulate distraction, clutter, static. And Lent is a time to let things go, declutter, clean house.

The traditional question that we ask as we begin the season of Lent is “What are you giving up for Lent?” And frankly, if shedding vices does the trick to re-set your life and help you refocus on your relationship with God, well that is great. Have at it. And it is tempting to try find a magic formula to help us all get in touch with the sacred at the center. I don’t believe there is such a formula. However, I do believe that in our lives we accumulate belongings and beliefs and habits that clutter and make it hard to walk the path of faith. My workshop gets hard to use because of clutter, and there is less joy in it. My life of faith is the same.

The challenge is to simplify, to travel light, to let go of that which does not serve the life to which we are called, to face the insidious creep of accumulation and distraction, and declutter.

Me? My goal is to get my shop back, to clean house, to let go of everything that clutters my space. And in the process, to clear my mind, and clear my heart, to clean house within as well, to let go of everything that clutters my internal space. I invite you to join me in a season of letting go.

Amen.