



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“There is no way to Peace; Peace is the Way”

Matthew 18:21-33

Will Sparks

November 11, 2012

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

A long time ago I heard a story of two monks, I think they were Buddhist monks, who were walking along a road. They had taken vows of peacefulness, and poverty and had vowed never to touch a woman. And they were walking along the road and came to a wash-out. There was a group standing on their side of the washout, and people were slowly making their way through the water that was pretty fast moving and deep, carrying their belongings above their heads. And there was this woman dressed in really nice clothing standing at the edge of the water wondering what to do. She needed to cross but was worried about the current and didn't want to ruin her clothing.

So one of the monks offered to carry her across. The other monk said, you're a monk! You can't do that! What about your vow? But he said, no, she needs me to do this. I can do this.

So he picked her up and walked through the fast moving water and put her down on the other side. The other monk followed behind muttering about breaking the rules and what was this order coming to if it let this kind of thing go on.

Well they left the washout and continued down the road. It was a nice day, birds chirping in the trees. The sun had emerged after the rains. Air was clear. But the air was kind of thick between these two monks. The one seemed to be enjoying the day but the other, every once in a while would harang his brother for having broken his vow. I can't believe you just threw away years of faithful observance. How could you do that. It is a disgrace.

Finally after this had gone on for a while, the monk who had carried the woman across the water stopped walking and turned to his brother. “Listen. I put that woman down by the edge of the water miles back. When are you going to put her down?”

The theme for November is “Forgiveness and Reconciliation.” Putting down the things that we carry within us that make our journey so difficult. You know in over 20 years of ministry, the single most frequent spiritual struggle that people have named with me in counseling has been the struggle of forgiveness. Something happens, we are hurt, betrayed, or we have hurt or betrayed someone else, and we carry that. Sometimes we are aware of how heavy a burden that is and sometimes we are not. But we know that somewhere down the road we have got to lay down the burden. The process of laying our burdens down is the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. The trouble is, that process can be a painful one. And so we get busy, we avoid it, or we say it wasn't a big deal- forget it. And we can do that for a while. We can avoid the painful process of forgiveness and reconciliation, but inevitably, it comes back.

Here in Canada we call this day Remembrance Day, and we have a phrase that is repeated around Cenotaphs and in Legion halls and churches all across the country, Lest we forget. Lest we forget. And there is a certain desperation in that phrase because somehow we know in our hearts that “forgive and forget” is bad advice because if we become forgetful, if we forget the incredible price paid for conflicts in the past, we may well repeat the broken patterns that produced the conflicts in the first place. Remembering honestly is a necessary part of the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. Remembering.

The disciples struggled with forgiveness as well. They knew it was a requirement of their faith. They knew it was one of the rules, and they wanted to follow the rules, but they also got tired of it, struggled with it just like you and I do. It's hard. It's painful. How long will I have to keep doing this? Isn't there some point at which I can just say, forget it!

Well, no actually, there isn't a time when we can just say "Forget it." And the reason we can't just say forget it is because we live constantly on both sides of the forgiveness equation. We are both forgiven and forgiving. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. None of us have lived the perfect life, so all of us find ourselves on one side or the other of the need for forgiveness. That is what that startling story of the servant and the debt was all about. A warning tale about the human inclination to write somebody off. As if we can simply say "forget it," or worse yet, "forget you!" As long as we are human and in human community, forgiveness is with us. We are in it.

But probably even more importantly, there isn't a time when we can just say, forget it, because forgiveness is not a destination. It is not a place we arrive at and are done with it. Rather, it is a spiritual practice, a daily, weekly, monthly, yearly thing we practice. Like November 11th, we do it over and over because the practice of it, is, in itself, healing. Forgiveness is a thing we do every week when we come here, gather up the pieces of our lives, the parts that seem so well put together and the parts that seem to us are in shambles. The parts we think we have mastered and the parts that continue to baffle us. We practice the art of unburdening, of laying down the things we carry. That practice is the practice of forgiveness, of letting go of the things we carry.

And how many times do we have to keep doing this before we finally get it perfect? According to Jesus, that's not the way it works. But wait for it. Because in my experience, forgiveness somehow someday seeps in. Oh we never fully arrive, but in time and with practice we lay down a piece of our life, a painful tangle of our past, and in the laying down of it, it dawns on us that it is not as burdensome as it once was. Somehow, in this practice of remembering, of laying it down and letting it go, healing has worked its way in to the fabric of our life. Forgiveness becomes not so much the end or the road, but the road itself. Amen.