



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Heartwork"

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Matthew 6:19-33

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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

Two weeks ago I offered you an image of the work of faith in our lives and in the world. "God is the artist. We are the medium of God's handiwork." And we talked about the relationship agreement that we have with God- the covenant. In the history of our faith, from the very beginning, covenant has been the language our people have used to talk about our relationship with God. From the time of Abraham, there has been a covenant- "I will be your God and you will be my people..." And the promise at the core of the covenant is that God agrees to always be with us, be faithful to us, and we will be devoted to God, and live by the core commandments of God. That is the deal- the soulmate agreement- the covenant.

This is an agreement between us and God, but who is the us part of the agreement. Originally it was Abraham, but it became Abraham and Sarah, it became their family- God would make of him a great family, a great nation. It became a relationship between God and all Israel. And then it took on a controversial land component which is controversial even to today. For Christians we have often defined it in terms of the church or in terms of our ministry. God has a relationship with us as a community. That is the location of God's handiwork, in us. That is the place God is doing God's work, right?

Sometimes, though, we have even been so bold as to say that God is doing a work of art in our lives, that perhaps our lives is the location of God's activity, God's work. But today, I want to take it even one step closer and imagine with you that the location of God's work of art, the place where the covenant, the relationship agreement is being worked out is right here, in your heart of hearts, in your very person. Jeremiah said, "the day is surely coming when I will renew my covenant with my people says The Lord, and I will place my law in them, and write it on their hearts." And Jesus says, we spend so much of our life's energy worrying about externals, "what we will eat and what we will wear..." But at its core, the relationship with God must be lived right here (heart). Let the Kingdom of God reign here, be lived here, first and foremost. Because without it being lived here, it is very hard to make it live anywhere else in the world.

Now I have to tell you that as Christians, the evangelicals are way ahead of us on this one. They know the language of God living here. "Give your heart to Jesus" is their mantra. You've heard it. You must accept Jesus as your PERSONAL Lord and Saviour. And the language is urgent. Are you saved? And by that they mean, do you have a personal relationship with God, have you accepted Jesus into your personal life? Clearly, they get this personal dimension of the soulmate agreement. The struggle I have with my evangelical sisters and brothers is not the personal dimension of the faith, but I often find myself asking, "Am I saved from what?" I was not aware that I was in jeopardy. Saved from eternal damnation? I don't believe that my loving God would do that. But if we are talking saving, I've got a long list of things that need saving: the earth needs saving from our misuse of it. There are whole populations that need saving from hunger, malnutrition, endless cycles of injustice, oppression, war. And immediately, the location of the struggle moves away from the personal and into the collective. See how I did that? See how I shifted the focus off myself, off that personal place and on to other dimensions? For me, and I think for us as good United Church Christians, we quickly

move away from the personal relationship with God, and locate the struggle for life outside of ourselves. And although this is legitimate, today, I want to keep the focus on this place- the heart- as the foundational place of the covenant, the artistic activity of God.

Behind every pair of eyes, there is a soul at work. Did you know that? As you look around here at church and as you go through your life seeing other people, it is important to remember that behind every pair of eyes, there is a soul at work. The great orator of the faith, William Sloane Coffin used to tell the story about a woman he used to encounter in front of a fancy New York department store. This is ritzy New York we are talking about here. The place where celebrities and notable people might be found. She would jump in front of people as they came out of the store and would say to them “are you anybody”? She was looking to brush up against an important person. Imagine if someone jumped in front of you, face to face, nose to nose and asked you, ‘are you anybody’? You might be hard pressed to answer. But your heart knows the answer because God is the artist, and is doing a great work of art in here with you, in your heart, in your character, in your personality. It is a work in progress from the day we draw our first breath to the day we let go of our final one. A work in progress and a great work - a magnum opus going on in you. Did you know that? Do you really believe it, or do you think somebody else is somebody and you are of little consequence. Friends, behind EVERY pair of eyes, there is a great work happening, and so as we hold ourselves here and as we behold each other, we do so with the utmost respect, and we live to encourage each other in that great work.

The thing is, we don't always respect that great work in ourselves. Every day people come into the church carrying their lives in their hands, bringing with them their stories, like some great disastrous laundry list. Sometimes they carry their lives, cupped in their hands like a bird with a broken wing, afraid to hold them too closely for fear of breaking them further. Sometimes they drag their lives behind them like a sackful of really heavy stuff, or hanging off the end of their fingers like getting too close to their lives is just unpleasant.

I am never sure as people talk to me, how much of the straight goods I am getting on people's lives, because none of us are completely objective about our own lives. We protect ourselves from the truth of them because the truth is the hot coal at the centre and that is a volatile place. But occasionally we are allowed to see, like the time when a pastor friend of mine was called to the hospital, to visit a man who was dying, that he didn't know. As they talked he said he failed at everything he tried, school, work, marriage, parenting, sobriety. He drank a can of paint, thinking it was tomato soup. He lived, but barely. He was silent; it was like all his failures were gathering all around him and sneering at him. He looked up, as if my friend hadn't been there all along. He said, what church are you from Rev; from the United church. He said “I was baptized there” they can't take that from me. They can't take the moment where he was blessed, and cherished. Maybe the knowledge has been shoved down, covered over, in the disappointments, maybe it's a subjugated message. Where can I go from your presence- where can I flee from your spirit. Even there. Hold me, hold me fast. It's a knowing that gets pushed down, kept down in the struggle for life.

But the heart knows. The heart knows that beneath it all, God is at work in here, a work of art. Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you. I was baptized in the United Church. They can't take that away from me. And we need to get back to that personal dimension in the United Church. We need to see this place, here (our heart) as a foundational dimension of Christian formation. We do a lot of great things. What are we doing to work with God in the formation of the great work that is happening here? How are we deepening in our understanding of ourselves, in the forming of our character? How deeply do we respect the lived struggle that is going on behind our own eyes? It seems to me that attention to our personal relationship with God is a fundamental purpose of the church, why we are here... to respect and to encourage that great work going on right here in every single person. And that is what I mean

when I talk about Christian development, at any age- the development of that great work happening in every heart and soul.

There is a great gaping personal-ness about life. We come into this world naked and vulnerable, and though we are never alone, there is a dimension upon which life is lived personally, between us and God. This is soulwork, which is our own work to do. Nobody can do it for us. People can help, but it is ours to do. It can be shared, and is best shared, but at its deepest level, it is really only shared with God- God the artist. This is the deepest and most internal level of the soul mate agreement. You are called to participate. We are here to encourage you in that work, that only you can do.

I think this is the place where the evangelicals do the alter call isn't it? This is the time when we give our lives to Jesus. And I can smile and joke, because everybody knows I'm not going to do that. It just doesn't fit. But I do want to say that they got this part right: we have to decide. We have to choose. We have to commit to the great work God is doing here. Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness- seek first that God should take priority, should come first here, and all the rest will follow.

Let us pray...