



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Just who is here?”

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7, Luke 24:13-35

Will Sparks October 28, 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

Jesus told a story about a great reckoning in which God gathers the faithful and says to them, when I was hungry, you gave me food, and when I was thirsty you gave me drink, and when I was sick or in prison you visited me, and when I was a stranger you welcomed me. And the faithful say, “what? When did this happen? This is the first time we have ever really been face to face.” And the holy One will say, “Whenever you did this to the least of these, my beloved children, you did it to me...” God, incognito, under cover, in the world.

And all through October we have been touching on different parts of our ministry in which we encounter God, in the hungry, in women who teach and show us the way. And today, in the stranger- when I was a stranger you welcomed me.

I had a stunning experience this week. I had stopped in at the grocery store to pick up a few things late in the day. Kind of on auto-pilot, you know. And got to the check-out. There was one customer ahead of me, and I put my stuff on the conveyor, and watched as the cashier ran his stuff through. His items came to a little more than \$25. And I watched as the guy gave the cashier a \$50 bill, and the cashier, obviously also a little on auto-pilot, pulled change out- 2 20s and some change and handed it back- 44. 80 in change.

At first I was kind of in a fog, and then it kind of dawned on me. He gave the guy an extra \$20. And as the guy made his way to the door I thought, “oh dear, that’s going to be hard to balance at the end of the day.” So I said, “I think you gave that guy \$44 instead of \$24.” And the cashier kind of woke up out of his automatic mode, a little shocked, and called out to the guy, went over and retrieved the extra \$20. I said to him when he came back, “That would have been a bummer when it came time to balance your cash eh.” And he had this stricken look on his face. “Bummer? No that would have cost me my job. We are not allowed to be more than \$3 off at the end of a shift or we lose our job.”

Wow! I couldn’t believe it. Neither of us were on autopilot anymore. I had no idea. And I thought, I could have been 30 seconds later, I could have not been paying as much attention, I could have thought, it’s none of my business, or it doesn’t really matter, or whatever, but I had no idea that in that moment, this guy’s job was on the line. He was around 40 maybe, probably has kids at home... I mean, I had no idea what was at stake, in that moment.

Friends, indeed we have no idea- no idea what is at stake for those around us in any moment. What people are carrying around with and in themselves in every moment. There is so much going on for friend and stranger alike at any time, and we just don’t know it. And we can make a critical difference for good or ill in any moment, and we had no idea about it. As my friend Peter Short says, “Behind every set of eyes there is a soul at work.” That is something to behold- worth paying attention to. That is what is on the line- what is at stake in the quality of our hospitality. Thing one in our ministry of hospitality- need- of heart and mind, body and soul walks through that door, sits next to you every time we gather.

Abraham and Sarah had no idea They were camped under the oaks of Mamre and they had no idea. They had set up there for a while. They were getting on in years, and though God had promised it, they had not been able to have children, something that grieved them every day,

though if you had come to Mamre that day you may have had no idea about that. And three strangers arrived on the road. Now in their culture there was a protocol about welcoming the stranger. You always gave them water, because you never knew, in that desert land, when you would be short of water. It was a life and death thing. But for some reason, when these three strangers arrived Abraham took it further than that- he set a feast for these three. He offered amazing hospitality. Little did he know, these three were messengers from God, sent to bring the news that Sarah would become pregnant. These strangers were God-bearing strangers, and they had no idea. They had no idea what was at stake when these three arrived, but they welcomed them, and that welcome made all the difference. They were entertaining angels unawares (this story is where that phrase comes from).

The disciples were on the road to Emmaus after the weekend in which Jesus had been crucified, and there were stories going around that his body had disappeared and lots of speculation about that. And these two encounter a stranger, and walk with him a while. And they talk about a lot of things. And they get close to their destination, and they make a choice. They choose to invite him in, to stay with them. They have no idea who he is- really. And in a moment, when they are breaking bread, they see just who it was that they welcomed that day, and had no idea. Thing two in our ministry of hospitality- gifts of grace walk through that door every week and we have no idea about it.

Yesterday morning about 30 of us gathered here with Dave Anderson, a minister from Coquitlam, and he led us in thinking about our ministry of welcoming. And he did a little math, because I told him that there are new people coming through the door all the time. Kerry and I counted, listed them off, the people we knew about who had come for the first time in the last 5 months. There were about 16 new households. So I don't know if that is higher than average, but think about that. That means 48 new households per year walk through our door. And that is without anybody going out and doing any recruiting of newcomers. That's just people who come for whatever reason, and there is always a reason. There is always a story, and you never know it until later, if you're lucky.

Think about that. If half those people who walk through that door for the first time decided that they belonged here, that Northwood was a community that had the capacity and the inclination to meet that deep soul mind body heart need they bring, to welcome and receive the incredible gift that they are, that would be about 50-60 people this year. That means that in 3 years, this community would look markedly different than it does today. Welcoming the stranger changes us. If our goal is, Northwood United Church, the same yesterday, today and forever, then don't talk to the newcomer and they will go away, and Northwood will not change. But if our goal is to have a growing vibrant Northwood, that means things will change. Thing three in this ministry of hospitality- change will come, and we need to decide not to resist it, but to embrace it.

Friends, there is a song, it's called lead us safely home, and the lyrics are rooted in the belief that every one of us is a soul on a journey, a soul in a strange land if you will, on this physical journey, and that we have come from home, and we are on our way home. It is a joyous and perilous journey for the soul, filled with ecstasy and heartbreak. And when we encounter another person we are ourselves a soul on the way home encountering another soul on their way home. The prayer of the song is, lead us safely home. And one verse goes like this: "look into each other's eye, beyond the laughter and the lies. Oh God of heaven make us wise and lead us safely home."

May we be a community of souls, strangers and friends, and may we be attentive to the depth of need, and gift, and change and opportunity that is before us in every moment. Amen