



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Gratitude: ‘It Gets Me Every Time’”

Matthew 6:25-33

Will Sparks October 11, 2015

Thanksgiving Sunday

May the words of 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.

I am sitting beside the piano two Sundays ago. Diane Lines, the wonderful jazz singer, piano player and deeply spiritual soul and I were talking about the service coming up and the conversation wandered in and out of songs, readings, poems and experiences. I was talking about the preciousness of community and the privilege of sharing a piece of the road together, and her focus drifted off into the distance for a moment and got just a little misty. And then, she came back to this moment and said, “Sorry. I was just thinking about people and how grateful I am. Gratitude.” She said. “It gets me every time.”

Twenty-three thousand, five hundred and fifty six days into the journey from which no traveler returns, Carman MacAree sat on the bench in Bear Creek Park just around the corner from Poetry Rock and looked out on the leaves changing on the maple trees, contemplating his life. Gulls flew in hoping he might offer lunch. It was one of those picture perfect sparkly clear Indian Summer days.

Twenty-three thousand five hundred and fifty six days, he thought. Sixty seven years, three months and ten days since his first wail had split the morning back in Weyburn Saskatchewan. “Mark my words”, the midwife had said. “That boy is going to be one of the best. We’ll be hearing about him someday, and people will be hearing about Weyburn because of him.” And maybe that statement, emblazoned on his sub-conscious, had been the start of the problem. Not a big problem. Nothing dramatic or life-threatening. It was just that all his life he had been dissatisfied. The best was not something he had experienced and even when he’s come close, it was not quite good enough.

He thought of his grandmother (perhaps it was the heron that had reminded him of her-rail thin, gaunt and grey, her straight hair always escaping from the tortoise-shell combs. She had been older than God, although he thought with a start that at the time he was now remembering, the time of his childhood, she had been younger than he was now. Core member of the United Church- a Methodist before church union. Not just a Sunday Christian either. As early as he could remember she had held him on her knee or sat at his bed and told him Bible stories. He could still remember the difference between Elijah and Elisha, and still knew by heart parts of the sermon on the mount, “Take no heed for your life, what you shall eat, what you shall drink; or for your body, what you shall wear... Seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.” And there was that other phrase that she used to quote. Over and over she would say, “Carman, remember. The best of all- God is with you. Count your blessings.”

The best. The best of all. Sitting there with the October sun warming his face, Carman thought of all the changes he had rung in. He remembered the smell of his footy PJs that he would pull on after the Saturday night baths in the kitchen tub- filled with boiling water cooled with handfuls of snow. How he had hated having his hair washed and being scrubbed ‘til he was red. But best of all was pushing his feet into the ends of the cardboard-stiff footy PJs, not the feel but the smell of line-dried clothing as he drifted off to sleep.

“Best of all” would certainly not be his description of his name. Oh, he had taken grief for his name. Hadn’t really paid much attention until in high school the town bully who made Donald Trump look like Mr. Dress-up, had said that “Carman” was a girl’s name, and had coined the nickname, “Carmen Macaroni.” During that time he would have sold his soul to the devil for a good guys name, like Mike or Bill or Bob. Now-a-days best of all would have been something like Lance, or Chadd or Justin.

Best of all had not been his marriage. They had been a couple of scared kids who thought that all they had to do was attend the pre-marriage sessions offered by Rev. McMurtry- one on money, one on spiritual matters, and one on... well... “Intimate matters,” and all would be well. There had been tension over money. The counselor had called it “incompatibility,” although it all seemed to him that not having enough income threatened anyone’s patability. Best of all would have been if Sun Oil had found oil on their land instead of the neighbors. Then incompatibility would never have been a problem.

The children, despite their best efforts had been, well, ok. And the grandchildren- you know if they could come up with a hair style that did not involve shaving some bits and leaving other bits hanging over their eyes he might be a little happier.

Yes, with the midwife’s prediction whispering away in his ear he had run for a seat in the Legislature- taken a leave from teaching not just once but twice. He had thought that “Best of All” would have been to win. He had lost twice. And then, when he did finally win, he realized the truth in Muggeridge’s statement: “I voted once in my life. It was for a man who had been in a mental institution and was standing for Parliament. Unlike all the other candidates, he had a certificate proving his sanity.” Best of all was the day he went back to teaching.

What does best mean anyway? What is best of all? As he thought back over his life, with the sun still warm on his face and the leaves still shining in the light, some pieces began to click together. Maybe it was the brilliance of the air, and the sweetness of the fall. He was feeling- what was it? Contentment? Happiness? Peace? Or was it all those things and perhaps a little more?

He would never be best of all. There would be no great memorials in his name 50 years from now. No Order of Canada. No granite marker in the park with his name on it like Poetry Rock around the corner. But there were memories, of stiff sleepers and the smell of linseed oil in a one room school. There was Dorothy, who would be waiting for him with a hug and a kiss after 47 years- a lot more than many. They had more than stuck it out together. And his name, actually it fitted him and he fitted it.

And if he had not been one of the best, he had, he believed, done his best. He realized that what he was feeling in that moment was more than happiness, or contentment, or peace. It was gratitude. Gratitude for life. Gratitude for a grandmother who was, it turned out, quite right that “the best of all is- God is with you.” Gratitude: it gets you every time.

Twenty-three thousand five hundred and fifty six days into the journey from which no traveler returns, Carmen MacAree sat on the bench in Bear Creek park, just around the corner from Poetry Rock, and looked out on the leaves changing on the maple trees, contemplating his life, and counting his blessings. And if you had strolled by, you might have heard him saying over and over again, “thank you.”

Amen.