



Sermons from Northwood United Church

**“On memory and gratitude”
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Matthew 6:25-33
Will Sparks October 7, 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.

Within my family, few of my abilities are as legendary as my ability to forget significant details. It's all pretty standard stuff: picking things up at the grocery store, where I left the keys, children's names. You know how this goes right. So I begin today with a poem by Billy Collins called forgetfulness:

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart

Memory. So crucial to our understanding of ourselves. So rich when shared, laughed over, cried over. I went to see Sid Bentley last week. Some of you may remember Sid from the two times that he has offered his wisdom and bottomless well of knowledge to our religions of the

world and faith of our neighbors series. 85 year old Sid is in the hospital with cancer and is facing the end of this great adventure. We sat together and watched the afternoon drift by and he told stories. Memories poured out of him like fresh water that would never run dry. Sid is facing the end of his life with an overwhelming sense of gratitude rooted in memory. It's not just the fond ones either. He remembers being a snotty nose kid terrorizing neighbors, the arrogant youth quitting school at grade 10 and wanting to go west to the coast, the mistakes he made that hurt people. But along with it he remembers the grace he has received, the unearned love he has been given. And he is grateful.

Moses is standing on the banks of the Jordan River. He too is coming to the end of his life. He looks across at the Promised Land, knowing he will not be able to cross, and says to the people who will enter the land flowing with milk and honey: When you get there, and when you have settled and are enjoying the comfort of stability, no longer wandering in the wilderness, fearful and vulnerable, this is what I want you to do. When the first crops are harvested, take the very first and best, and take it to the place you worship God, and tell the priest there where you came from. Sit there for an afternoon if you must, but remember: A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...

Remember that there was a time when you were an alien in this land, a total newcomer, and your life was not stable, or settled, and make sure that this memory does not plant the seed of self-satisfaction in you (look at what I have made of myself), but rather the seed of gratitude (look at what I have been given). Let it do a work within you to make you compassionate, and welcoming of the stranger in your midst, because there was a time... there was a time...

And this is Thanksgiving in Canada. Look around folks. There are very few of us who can go back 10 generations on this land. And those who can have tended to be stunningly generous to the rest of us. But by and large, we are all aliens, relative newcomers to the place we presently live, to the stability we presently enjoy. French, English, German, Korean, Japanese, Jamaican, South American, Philippino, Chinese, Indian, Sri Lankan, if there is one thing that unites us, it is that. A wanderer was our ancestor, who came here, an immigrant on this land. All of us, with the exception of our aboriginal neighbors. If that doesn't plant the seed of gratitude in us, nothing will.

And today, when we gather around this table, the table of grace, the table which rests on the memory of Jesus and all he said and all he stood for and all he did, we remember that we are all alien to this kind of grace- none of us earn it, all of us are simply loved into a place at this table. And then if you are gathering around another table this weekend, may you remember, and may that memory plant the seeds not of self-satisfaction, but of gratitude in you.

“We are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love... and then we return home.” Australian Aboriginal proverb