



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Search me”

Psalm 139, Luke 15:1-10

Will Sparks

September 15, 2013

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

Barbara Brown Taylor, whose writing about preaching I deeply respect wrote a little book a few years ago called. “When God is Silent.” It is a great and fiercely honest book about just how hard a task it is to speak words on Sunday morning that have any integrity at all if you have any respect for the task. Is the time we spend over the next few minutes a time for me to offer some illuminating words about who God is and how God works and what God is up to and how it might relate to your life and our life and the life of this planet? Is that the task? That’s kind of intimidating. I suppose if you think God is rather simple and easy to figure out, and if God speaks to you all the time, then the task is pretty straight forward. However, if you come to the task with the conviction that God is a wholly mystery, that the Creator of the universe is vast and amazing, and if you are like me and you spend most of your time searching and wondering and groping in the relative darkness about the meaning of it all because you feel so small in the vastness, awed into silence at life, let alone life’s creator. Most often, there are my words about God in one hand, and the great mystery of God in the other, and my words crumble and fall through my fingers. Add to that a healthy respect for what I don’t know about God and life. If you find yourself stuck for words about God when tragedy strikes, or when you consider global warming, or when you think about the tangles in places like Syria, not to mention the tangles we ourselves stumble into in our own lives, well then I sometimes wonder if any words suffice.

My preaching mentor over the years has been former moderator Bob Smith. I went to Shaughnessy United years ago just to hear him speak. When I was then in Salmon Arm and we were looking for a guest speaker, I called up then retired Bob and asked him to come. He thought for a moment and then said simply, “I have filled the world with a lot of my words over the years. Now it seems to me more appropriate that I sit in silence and behold the mystery.”

You see it is not that we preachers can’t talk, or can’t come up with something to say, but it can’t just be anything. The question is, who am I to be speaking of the Great Mysteries, and what if my words end up getting in the way rather than paving the way. And that, my friends, is why the real wise ones over the centuries, have resorted to speaking cryptically, in parables, in funny little stories that tend to unravel our thinking rather than tie it up in a nice neat little bow- more likely to lead us off the beaten path than down it.

Like the parables of Jesus. Today we are at the heart of Luke’s gospel and here we have three parables, two of which we read today. But let’s think about them together. Three pearls on a string; three treasures that speak to the core of Jesus’ message. Three lost items: a sheep, a coin and a son. Three seekers: a shepherd, a woman, and a father. Three outlandish responses: Leave your 99 perfectly good healthy sheep in the wilderness to go looking for the one lost one, spend your whole day scouring the house over and over til you find the one coin, and pine for years over the son who utterly disregarded you and blow the bank on a great celebration when he finally comes home. Three cryptic stories, and somewhere in the middle of them is a key to unlock the ways of God. Somewhere in them there is truth, deep truth about God and life and what we are all here for. Something to do with being lost.

What is it like for you to lose something precious. When Treena and I were in Mexico some years ago, one evening we left the kids in the hotel room with Aidan in charge and went for a nice dinner. Lovely evening. It was the evening I proposed to her and she said yes. Gorgeous dinner. Mariachi band. Flaming special coffees. A walk on the beach. It was spectacularly fun and lovely. And to end it all, our camera was stolen. Yes, we lost a really good camera with a really good lens on it. But much more significantly, we lost the pictures of a couple of pretty momentous experiences. And they are lost to us; we can't get them back. We felt sick, and sad, and annoyed. And those were just pictures. What about when we lose bigger things, truly precious things. We spent 3 weeks last year searching for a lost precious cat, and the family was in agony. And then we lose a relationship- the grief of dreams unfulfilled, the powerlessness of being unable to fix it, the guilt, the disappointment or regret. Or when we lose control of our life, we lose a job, or a pregnancy, or a drivers licence. We know about losing things and how it feels.

And if we are honest, we also know how it feels to be lost- when life has taken a turn, landed us in unfamiliar territory and we don't know which way to go. The precious coins of direction or purpose can clink to the floor like coins through a hole in our pocket and roll under bed and we are lost, without purpose or direction. The precious ring of perspective that we had placed so carefully by the sink rattles its way down the drain and perspective is an elusive thing sometimes. Perspective is like our compass in the wilderness. Lose that and you are truly lost. Or our ideals and dreams. Sometimes we can lose track of them, and when that happens we can wake up some morning and wonder what our life is for anyways. Or our priorities, if we lose track of them, we can end up in a life we never actually wanted in the first place. So many ways, and how easily we get lost.

And in these moments, typically good well-meaning Christians often say, "turn to God, and God will be there," as if we haven't been turning to God all along. These lost times, these dark nights of the soul are more often characterized by the silence of God than God's clear and guiding voice. That is why they are called dark nights of the soul, when God's light is not perceivable. And so often the religion of sin and guilt and salvation only intensifies the darkness and confusion. What did I do wrong, and why is God so hard to find?

The Pharisees and religious leaders were grumbling because Jesus hung out with sinners, those who were guilty and ought to feel ashamed. And Jesus looked at the way these leaders offered the stone of guilt and shame to people who were already burdened by life, and he said, let me tell you a story. And the story was not about right and wrong. It was about getting lost and getting found. And in these stories the lost ones were not judged, they were simply lost, like any of us could be lost. These people are no more guilty than anybody else, than you yourself, or me. Rather, they are lost, and struggling. These parables take us off the path of religion based on sin and guilt and shame (what have I done that life is so hard) and on to a new path. And on this new path, sometimes we just get lost. It is part of life. And on this path, we are not so much the seeker, striving to find God, but we are the one being sought, the precious lost one, and God is tirelessly tracking us down, and finding us, and bringing us home. How we got lost and why is not the point. That is a conversation for another time. That we be found and brought home is all that matters now.

The re-orienting truth at the core of the gospel, only really expressible in parable form has little to do with us and what we have done or not done, and has everything to do with God, God's character, God's tenacious determination to find us, and love us back to life.

The Sufis have a saying, "beyond the worlds of right and wrong there is a field. I will meet you there." Jesus is inviting us beyond the worlds of right and wrong, beyond the judging God to a new gospel. Just imagine God, shepherd, a woman, a father, and you and I, and the child waking up in Syria today, and the guy behind the thrift store trying to dull the pain with a needle, and the child starting

school, and the teen brimming with emotion, and the native elder stoking her courage to testify at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission this week, all of us are being searched out by God. God is the treasure keeper, God is prowling the streets at night searching for lost ones, God is endlessly sweeping the corridors of your life and mine and will not give up until we are found and embraced, and brought home. This is the God of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us pray...