



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Grateful”

Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, John 6:25-35

Will Sparks October 13, 2013

Thanksgiving Sunday

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

I was gathered with a family some time ago as they remembered the life, just past, of their mother. It was not always an easy life, but as the respective kids remembered the different phases of her life, I was amazed. “She worked really hard during the child bearing years, and when they finally moved and settled down,” said the eldest son, “life was finally good. We really enjoyed those years.” To which the eldest daughter replied, “Those were the worst 8 years of my life.” What? How can two people experience a time period so differently? “Mom went out to work and I was left keeping things going at home. I couldn’t get out of there fast enough.”

Memory is a funny thing isn’t it. It is not just that we all have slightly different capacity for it. I am told some of us forget more easily than others. My memory is pretty good as far as I can remember. But also, different things stick in different people’s brains, like we all have slightly different kinds of Velcro in our brains. So we can be looking back on times past we have shared and remember them quite differently. And it changes with time. Our soul seems to reframe our past as it sees it in new light. We deepen in perspective- we take a longer view. And then of course, there is forgetfulness. Sometimes we can lose track of the things that really matter. Memory is not a static thing.

Have you ever noticed though, the tendency within yourself or someone else, to kind of sanitize or whitewash the past. Somehow our memory of that trip to the interior last summer managed to retain the sunshine but jettison the sunburn, retain the joyful arrival and nix the constant refrain of “when are we going to get there?” I have times in my life that were really stressful, but I notice that often the things that my memory retains as important are not the sleepless nights, or the anguished conflicts, but the place I finally came to in the end, the equilibrium that is finally established.

The beauty of the way our soul works on our past to create memory is that the soul’s work is a great work, the work of perspective, the work of eternal life in which all things find their rightful place. The danger of the way our mind works on our past is forgetfulness. Our mind can scrub clean painful events that actually need a place in our memory so that we can move forward wisely.

Moses knew all of this as he stood on the banks of the Jordon River. He and the band of slaves who had escaped from Pharaoh’s Egypt had lost their way, had wandered for 40 years in the desert, and had been hungry, nearly died of thirst, argued to the point of nearly killing each other, but had finally made it to this place. Moses was on in years by now and he would not go across the river with them. In a cruel twist of divine irony, he had been the one to bring them out of Egypt always holding before them the hope of the Promised Land, but when they finally got there, he would not cross. So he gathers the people at the river and he says to them, when you get there, and when you settle and when things are comfortable for you there, you are to take the first fruits of the harvest, the first and the best, and take them to the priest and dedicate them to God. And when you do this, recite the story. Remember the story. The story is important: A wandering Aramean was my great grandmother and grandfather. And we went down to Egypt, small, poor

and there we became a great nation. But we were slaves there. We were an oppressed people, treated harshly with hard labour and prejudice. So we cried out to God and God heard us, and brought us out of that harsh land with great power and might, and led us finally to this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. God guided us through the desert, and gave us a law to follow, and a vision of who we are and how we are to be. And so now we give the first fruits of what we have been given and we remember. That's thanksgiving, and for them, it would not be thanksgiving without the remembering. And the trick is to remember with integrity, remember the hard bits without getting bitter, remember the glorious moments without going all nostalgic.

Shelagh Rogers was in her last morning hosting the national CBC Morning show "Sounds Like Canada" in May of 2008. It was a great celebration of past shows, some of the best radio I had heard. She hit all the high spots. And then at the very end, she left us with this Ian Thomas song:

"Some luck in my sails. Success where some have failed. Troubles I've just made it through. Once in a while, a room with a view. One who says she loves me best. I have even put that to the test. Some hope with my regret and a whole lot of grateful."

"Found me some happiness in the middle of my restlessness. Life is one big wonderful mess. Things work out, eventually. Still paying for stupid things I've said. I've seen compliments go to my head. Funny how this road has led to a whole lot of grateful."

"A whole lot of grateful in me. A whole lot of grateful in me. You can't go back and change one thing. It all might come undone. You can end up on the losing side of battles you've already won. There's a whole lot of grateful."

I love the way Ian Thomas deals with memory. Probably even more than the balanced integrity of the lyrics, remembering the stupid things I've said, the hope along with the regret, the happiness mixed with restlessness. Life is one big wonderful mess. It's true. But probably even more than the balance is the way he expresses the interconnectedness of life. All things are connected. You can't go back and change one thing. It all might come undone. You could end up on the losing side of battles you've already won. You can't go back and remove a moment of deep struggle and pain because you will lose the character that emerged out of that struggle and pain. You can't go back and remove the loss, because you will also lose the compassionate response, the love shown in the midst of the loss. You can't go back and scrub out the cancer that afflicted Terry Fox. If you do that, you will lose a whole chain of events and responses that shaped him and his life and by extension, have shaped us as a nation. Life is woven together. It is a tapestry of interconnected threads. A big wonderful mess.

Sometime this weekend, whether it is over a meal, in a quiet moment alone, or on a walk in the sunshine and colours of the fall, I want to encourage you to look back, to take a moment to pay attention to that which has brought you to where you are now- the tapestry of life which has created you, in which your life is held now. Remember the people and the circumstances that you had nothing to do with creating, the things and the people that have simply come into your life that have shaped you. Remember with integrity, without any attempt to change one single thing. I believe Moses had it right. It is not possible to remember with integrity without coming to realize that our life depends on forces well beyond our control, that life is one big wonderful mess, that we play but a humble part in the making of our own lives, and that, when all is said and done, we are deeply blessed. And in remembering, may you know a whole lot of grateful. Amen.