



Sermons from Northwood United Church

**“Forgiveness and Healing”
Genesis 32:22-32, Mark 2:1-12
Will Sparks November 18, 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.

There’s a small town in New Brunswick called Magundy that was, back in the early part of the twentieth century a pretty poor part of Canada. People basically lived off the land and in this part of New Brunswick, the land offered logs in abundance. In Magundy there were two families that didn’t get along. And when I say they didn’t get along it was a Romeo and Juliet kind of not getting along. There was no tolerance for any association within either family for the other. Kids not allowed to play at school with each other; when you meet on the street, you cross on the other side.

As it happened a son from the one family, whose name was Guy and a daughter from the other family named Roxie fell in love. They knew that if this were to get out, there would be hell to pay for both of them so they kept their love a secret for the longest time.

Well, Guy’s family ran a family logging operation and every winter they would go out and set up a camp way out of town. They would go into the bush as the ground froze and not come out til just before spring breakup. Everybody went. The mom was the cook of the logging camp and the sons would go out with their father, and return to camp every night, all winter. This caused a forced separation between these two secret lovers, and it was during this separation that Roxie discovered she was pregnant.

Now this is early 20th century rural New Brunswick, a time and place in which there was great family shame attached to such things. So she wrote a letter to her beloved telling him the situation, and waited to hear back from him.

Unfortunately, when the mail arrived at the logging camp, the Guy’s mother got to it first, opened the letter, read it, and never passed it on to her son. Guy, unaware of Roxie’s predicament, had no opportunity to respond. When she heard nothing from him, 18 year old Roxie assumed that she had been abandoned. At this point she told her family of her situation. Stricken with shame, furious with the Guy for not taking responsibility for his actions, they decided to hide her away for the duration of the pregnancy.

Roxie was ashamed, and humiliated, and terribly distressed. And when she finally went into labour she didn’t tell anyone. She just went up to her room and struggled through it herself, until she was unable to hide it any longer. But unfortunately, by the time that her family discovered her in her room, it was too late. She did give birth to a son, but she died.

Her family was devastated, and that pain turned to anger and grew into bitterness. After Roxie was buried, the family erected a gravestone with an inscription that read as follows,

“In this cold grave I lie.
I was too young to die.
Young friends: I was not to blame
To destroy my life, it was his aim.
Here is my deceiver’s name
Guy McMurray
You know that God is just and true,
And will give this bold wretch his due.

When spring came, Guy returned to Magundy utterly unaware of what had taken place over the long winter, and utterly heartbroken at the loss of his beloved. The family of his son would not let him see him, the rift that had separated the two families before had now solidified into such a gulf of bitterness, anger and shame that it appeared it could never be broached. So bitter was the shame that Roxie's family finally packed up and left Magundy forever, leaving only a message carved in stone atop the grave of their daughter, and the young man named in the curse on a headstone, left to try to create a life beneath the shadow of the curse.

What a tangle eh? An incredible tangle. We get ourselves into tangles as human beings and as human communities. And we seem to do so with such predictable regularity that it is no surprise that forgiveness and reconciliation is the single biggest struggle people bring to me to talk about. Two weeks ago we heard Alvin Dixon, native elder and elder within the United Church talk about the journey of residential school survivors, a journey through truth, and healing on the road to reconciliation. And last week as we recognized remembrance day, it was clear that the cost of trying to solve these problems through armed conflict is immense, and we have to find other ways.

It is amazing to me, that one of the common characteristics in these situations where broken relationships are grinding people down and crying out for forgiveness and reconciliation is that the people in them are isolated and ashamed. They think that nobody knows and that if they did, their life would be over in some way. It takes incredible strength of character to even talk about it. Somehow we think we are unique in our broken marriage, in our tangled relationship with our children or our parents, in alcohol or drug addiction, in childhood trauma or abuse. It is like we have not read the statistics or think we are not part of them. But this struggle is our struggle, it is as old as Abraham, literally, and that you are in this means nothing more than that you are part of the human family. Really, we are in this together. That is why we have stories in our bible like Jacob wrestling with God and his past, because he is one of us.

That is why we remember stories like the paralyzed man taken to Jesus. Isn't that an amazing twist in that story, that these friends bring this guy who is paralyzed, and go to incredible lengths to get him in front of Jesus in broad daylight and in front of the whole community, and the first thing Jesus says to the guy is, "your sins are forgiven." What? How is that relevant. He's paralyzed! Fix his body Jesus! Heal his nervous system! But no. Your sins are forgiven. And according to the story, that is a social and political outrage. How could he be so audacious as to forgive sins? But Jesus knows something about what really paralyzes a person. We don't get to know what was paralyzing this man, but think about it. His friends bring him to Jesus because he is immobilized, and Jesus says, friend, your sins are forgiven. And that makes all the difference. He is finally able to move. And we know something about that. We know how our brokenness can immobilize us, can paralyze us, can trap us, so that we think there is nothing we can do. We are stuck. And somehow, the logjam of past events has to be broken, in this case by the declaration of God's forgiveness.

That is what is at stake in forgiveness and reconciliation, is our future, and our ability to live it, to move, to not be stuck in the logjam of past events so that they dictate our future. And the first step in this process is mustering up the courage to say what is, to tell the truth. In the 12 steps of AA, the 4th and 5th steps, after we have realized that our life is unmanageable and we decide to get on the path, we do a fearless and searching moral inventory of our life, and then we tell someone about it. That's the truth part. We can't truly get to the forgiveness and healing part without passing through the truth part. But having done many 5th steps with people, it is amazing to me how freeing, how mobilizing it is when we tell the truth.

But it doesn't stop there. After the truth is told, amends are made where they can be made. We do what we can do about the effects of our actions or our part in the situation. It is like what we say to our kids right. It is not just about saying sorry, and being sorry. It is also about making

it right, doing what we can to make it right with the person. We can't always make it right. Some things can't be just fixed. But when we have tried, genuinely tried, we then move on. And that is the process of forgiveness, reconciliation and healing.

Now I know it is difficult, and I know it is complicated, and I know that in all likelihood you are sitting here right now with a situation that in some way seems to defy this process, seems to be utterly resistant to this process. I know because I am sitting with a few myself in which, I don't know if healing is possible. And so I put that doubt alongside my equally strong belief that anything is possible with God, that in God's economy of mercy, all things are possible.

Guy, the young man who lost his love and lost access to his child continued to live in Magundy for the rest of his life, and the grave marker bearing his name continued to cast its shadow. The little child grew up in Roxie's family, hearing the bitter story of the death of his mother after his father callously abandoned her. He knew of the grave marker and the curse engraved upon it. Eventually he could not live a peaceful life as long as this curse was cast upon the father he had never met on his mother's account. He returned to the place of his birth with a hammer and chisel, and carved his father's name out of the stone, emptying the curse of its power over his father, over their families. And though I don't know if he ever met his father, he did send him father's day cards every year. He decided. I'll be damned if the legacy of bitterness and hate that has caused so much pain in my family will be my legacy. The curse, and its power stops with me. He chose mercy. Amen