



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Gracefully Through the Thistle Patch”

Luke 7:36- 8:3

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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

That is quite the conversation eh, between Jesus and Simon the Pharisee? To be fair to Simon, and I think Jesus is pretty fair to Simon, it must have been quite a scene. There they are sitting at table in Simon's home, a whole crowd likely, and slipping in amongst the crowd is this woman. Everybody knows her if not personally, at least by reputation. She's lived a hard life, made some huge mistakes, burned a lot of bridges. But this gospel has gotten under her skin, this way of unconditional love that Jesus is preaching, this way beloved community that loves all, includes all, forgives all. And for the first time in she can't remember how long, she feels like there is something here that sees her, includes her, loves her, forgives her. And so it all comes pouring out of her: the gratitude, the grief, the tears. And in Simon's world, it's... Well... Kind of unseemly. Messy. Awkward!

So Jesus addresses the awkwardness. Simon, do you see this woman? (That's a rhetorical question- of course he sees her.) But really. Do you see what is going on here. Look Simon, you've lived a kind of charmed life, and this has been a charming dinner- nice, pleasant, safe. This woman? She has lived an extreme life, a hard life. It's a long way back just to survival from where she has been, and what I want for her is a clean slate, a new start, all of it, wiped away and I want the abundant life that is possible for her. It is no wonder then that things got a little messy. Unconditional love when you haven't experienced it since forever is kind of overwhelming, so is it any wonder that when she started pouring out the gratitude she couldn't stop. Let's keep it real Simon. What she did was beautiful, albeit a little over the top emotionally, and a little messy.

Well folks, on a day such as this, in a season such as this, as I make my way and we make our way through the last few weeks of our relationship as minister and congregation, I have been feeling like there is a lot to pour out- a lot of thoughts, a lot of mixed emotions. And frankly, with this party coming up after the service I anticipate that after this sermon I will lose control of the mic so I'd better get my two bits worth in first. Because frankly, it is a time of really mixed emotion and it gets a little messy.

I had the funniest conversation the other day. Somebody came up to me and say, "hey Will. Congratulations on your move. I'm going to miss you. I am so mad at you. But good for you." And that brief little conversation spoke volumes to me about what this is like. People feel good that good things are happening to me because you genuinely care. And people want to be honest that they experience this as loss- "We're going to miss you." I get it. Me too. And people experience this as a kind of deliberate leaving which can kind of hurt. It is not just changing jobs, a lateral transfer within the company. No, it is changing relationships. And it's not like the boss came in one day and said, "pack up your things Sparks. I'm re-assigning you." I chose, and in choosing to accept the call to Highlands, I chose to leave Northwood. This ending echoes with some of the feelings of other endings in our lives, and although I don't want to be overly dramatic about it, in some ways this feels less like a death in the family and more like a divorce and I'm the jerk who made the decision.

I tell you this not to be dramatic but because it is real. We are celebrating some good years of ministry together today, and it is good to think in celebratory terms, but the reality of this is also kind of messy, and somewhat painful.

Roy Oswald, Congregational consultant formerly with the Alban Institute wrote a little book about the ending of pastoral relationships and in it he tells a story of his childhood. "When I was a young boy, aged six, growing up in rural Saskatchewan, my two older brothers and I would often decide to walk home from school over the fields, rather than along the road. It was shorter to be sure, but occasionally we would come upon enormous thistle patches. I cannot remember seeing anything like it since, but those thistle patches sometimes used to extend for a half mile or more. In places the prickly patches would be 50-100 feet wide- in other places, 10-20 feet. The rest of the field lying fallow in the summer, was tilled

soil. We rarely wore shoes to school in the summertime, hence our dilemma: how to cross these thistle patches in bare feet. We did have the choice of walking around them, but, since it was the end of the day, we were all tired and hungry. We were anxious to get home. Mother usually had a snack treat for us to tide us over til supper. To walk around the patch would take us way out of our way. The other option was to back up, and run through the narrowest part at full speed. Being the youngest, with the least speed and the smallest leg span, I always objected. I was usually over-ruled however, by my two other brothers who would then each take me by the hand and run me through the thistle patch. I can still vividly remember the experience: running full speed in bare feet across 20 feet of prickly thistles, yelping in pain all the way through. When the three of us reached the black soil on the other side, we would immediately hit the dirt and start pulling out the few thistle ends that stuck in our feet..."

From the day that I first realized that I was going to be leaving Northwood and heading to Highlands United, I knew that this time of transition was going to feel a little like making my way through a thistle patch. I know we will get to the other side, and on the other side, there will be good life, new relationships for you and for me, and I genuinely believe the possibility of renewal for us all, even though that feels a little uncertain at this stage. But between now and that new life, there is a thistle patch we have to make our way over that is a little messy emotionally. It triggers all the other endings we have experienced and adds another to the pile.

So if you discover lurking among the flowers of gratitude a thistle of anger- "how could you leave now! I was counting on you to be here for my... (Fill in the blank)! I understand, and I am sorry. If, as you sift through memories of how things have been, you run across that nasty little barb which goes something like, "He's leaving. Was it something we did?" The answer is no, but let me address the messy edges of that question. Someone wondered out loud the other day whether this move was more of a push or more of a pull. That is, the energy of this change: is it coming from what is happening at Northwood or what is happening at Highlands.

Honestly, it is never completely one or the other, but primarily it has been a pull. Northwood is a strong, resilient, gifted, committed community, a great place to be in ministry, will make it through this transition well. Of that I am confident and ministering with you these years has been good. In recent times with the amount of juggling we have had to do with property issues and staff changes all the while having to be constantly aware of limited resources, well, they never taught me anything about any of this in seminary. And I have often felt like I'm throwing pitches with my non-dominant hand. A little clumsy. The beauty is that we have been in all that together, and we've done well. So I never felt the push to leave. Primarily this is a pull- the pull of a new challenge that doesn't come along very often.

And in this thistle patch if your foot falls on the painful twinge of loss, just know that every change, even constructive change, involves loss, and there is loss in this for me too. But like with all other losses in life, if you look at it more closely you discover that there is also beauty woven in amid the loss- the beauty of relationship that has nurtured life, of faith that has grown and deepened, of love that reminds us who we are, of a season of rich life and joy that we can look back on and cherish with gratitude.

Gratitude. Yes, in my books, it all comes back to gratitude. It was gratitude that poured out of the woman with the ointment and the tears at Simon's house that day- gratitude for being loved when she didn't expect it. It is gratitude that reminds me of how good we have it, how blessed we are, and how much we have to offer the world. And gratitude is my mantra for the next 5 weeks, for I believe it is gratitude that helps us along, gracefully, through the thistle patch. Amen.