



Sermons from Northwood United Church

**“Cleaning House: What is left”
Isaiah 50:4-9 Luke 19:28-40
Will Sparks March 20,2016**

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

This morning I want to talk for a few minutes about a word that is in very common usage these days, that I catch myself using. It is not a four letter word, it is an eight letter word and it actually carries twice the punch of any four letter word I know. When you are hoping things will go one way and you are disappointed to discover that they are going another, you are likely to say, “Whatever.” “Whatever” is a way of saying, “Ah, it really didn’t matter. “Whatever” is the word we use to sound like it doesn’t really matter to us, but underneath it all, it does really matter to us. “Whatever” means we are settling for second, or third, or fourth best, and we are trying to be ok with that. “Whatever” is our way of disconnecting our heart from what is happening in our life. Though sometimes we use it when talking about things that don’t really matter: “Whatever, I don’t care what kind of salad dressing you put on the salad.” Often we use it when we are talking about things that really do matter: “whatever, I didn’t really need to see you today. Whatever, I didn’t really want to make that change in my life. Whatever, I’ll get over it.” When used this way, “whatever” is the word we use to disconnect from what we really want in life, from our heart’s desire, from the genuine call of God. That is the place where “whatever” represents a small death. “Whatever” can be a kind of letting go that minimizes what is precious to us, that diminishes life.

Throughout the season of Lent we have been circling around a theme "Cleaning house: the way of letting go." We started the season with the recognition that our lives, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually can accumulate and become cluttered such that we lose track of what is really important, central, precious, and indeed faithful. Lent is the season to "clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we may see all the things that really matter," on our way to the turning point story which we now enter during Holy Week. It is a story of struggle, where there is no room for clutter, where Jesus faces the powers at work in the world that bind and diminish and oppress. This is a week where there is no room for "whatever," no room for indifference, within Jesus, within the disciples, and within us. This week the question left when we have let go of everything is, are we a follower of the Way of Jesus? If we have let go of all that we are not, all that we do not stand or live for, what is left? What are we left hanging on to when we have let go of everything that clutters?

And what is left, for Jesus as he approaches Jerusalem, and for us as we approach Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Easter Sunday? What is left is simple, clean, unwavering, and fierce commitment to love at all costs. What is left is the polar opposite of "whatever", of indifference, but a fierce hold on love. We stand for is a love that has let go of fear of loss, unconditional love because we have let go of all the conditions.

I don’t know what the Aramaic word is for “whatever”, but Jesus could not abide the attitude of “whatever.” And all through his life and throughout his teaching he consistently said to those who diminished their own lives and the lives of others, “No. Not whatever. Prostitutes, your life does matter. Tax collectors, your place in the community does matter. Lepers, your wellbeing does matter. Poor folk, orphans, widows, the kingdom of God does belong to you too. The Samaritan woman at the well, God’s thirst quenching waters are for you. No, don’t say

“whatever” and settle for being placed on the margins of society by the Romans, or the Temple leaders, or the Pharisees, or your children, or your parents, or yourself, or the economic system, or anything else. Your life matters. To such as you belongs the Kingdom of God.

And just as saying “whatever” and letting go of something that really does matter constitutes a small death in the midst of life, so refusing to say “whatever”, refusing indifference, refusing to settle and rather saying, No, this really matters is, I believe a small resurrection in the midst of life. We often think of the resurrection as an event that happened to Jesus three days after the crucifixion. But I think it happened before. I think Jesus lived a resurrected life, a life undaunted by the threat of death, because he knew that the life and love of God that was at the core of his life was stronger than death. Jesus banished “whatever” from his vocabulary because he refused to settle for anything less than what he called the Kingdom of God- radical love and abundant life for everyone. And many, particularly those who were systematically set aside and had to settle for the margins got pretty excited by his vision and his way, and this stirring amongst the people was threatening. The resurrected life is threatening if you are counting on people to stay in their places. It is threatening to me, if I have grown attached to my life as it is. And I believe that Palm Sunday was the rising up of people who had, at long last, let go of “whatever,” heard the message of the Kingdom of God in their lives, thrown caution to the wind, and had taken it to the streets.

I put a small piece of poetry in the bulletin this week, written by Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan poet who had faced the death squads of Guatemala during the 36 year civil war. She had been threatened with death for her advocacy for the poor. And she came to the place of realizing that death had no power over her. And she wrote:

I am no longer afraid of death,
I know well
it's dark, cold corridors
leading to life.

I am afraid rather of that life
which does not come out of death,
which cramps our hands
and slows our march.

I am afraid of my fear
and even more of the fear of others,
who do not know where they are going,
who continue clinging
to what they think is life
which we know to be death!

I live each day to kill death;
I die each day to give birth to life,
and in this death of death,
I die a thousand times
and am reborn another thousand
through that love
from my People
which nourishes hope!

Jesus calls us to live a resurrected life, a life unconfined, and un-diminished, a life without “whatever.” And to do this we need to set our faces like flint, we need to be courageous, we need to gather with friends in the faith, we need to pray with an open heart the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will but thy will be done.” And this is the task of holy week. Amen