



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Cleaning House: Letting go of the world"

Mark 8:31-37

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May the words of our mouths, 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 heard Gary Patterson, former moderator of the United Church of Canada and minister at St. Andrews-Wesley downtown Vancouver on CBC radio the other morning. He was talking to Stephen Quinn about his Lenten sermon series based on the Oscars. It's something he has been doing now for some years- a great idea, but I'm glad you chose to come here instead.

Any movie buffs in the congregation this morning? Any of you see the 2014 film *Hundred Foot Journey*? Just a stunningly made piece of art, food lover's film, in which Helen Mirren plays Madame Mallory, the proprietor of a Michelin 5 star French restaurant in a small community in France and Manish Dayal plays Hassan, a budding chef who moves in across the road where his family sets up an Indian restaurant. The film tells the story of the feud that grows up on the hundred foot section of road between the two families and their restaurants and the story of Hassan's growth into an internationally acclaimed French Chef. It is a wonderfully sensuous film with many layers including colliding cultures, reconciliation, redemption, how food can be an expression, a tool and a metaphor for home and life and soul, and of course, the romance that is possible with fine food and wine.

Well one of the threads of the film has Hassan getting a once in a lifetime opportunity to cook in Paris, in a really high end establishment. And so he leaves the small village and travels to Paris where he will make a name for himself. And over the course of a year using innovative combinations of spices and flavors learned at the side of his late mother, he reaches the pinnacle of French cooking and breaks into the rarified world of Paris fine cuisine. His face is on the front page of *Le Chef* magazine. He has made it. He has arrived. And yet it has cost him so dearly. He is aching for his family, for the real life of the market and the less fine but beautiful sensuous, aromatic life of the small French village and the grounded press of family. But he has suppressed these longings for the simpler more grounded life because he is living the dream. And then, late one night, after everyone has gone home and he is sitting in the darkened stainless steel kitchen overlooking Paris, he finally lets the reality of his loneliness, and of all that he has lost or given up sink in. Living the dream and the dream reveals itself for what it is- a soul destroying race for perfection and innovation. Hassan has gained the whole world, but he has forfeited his soul.

The trade-offs we make in life. This is the second Sunday of the season of Lent in which we are exploring the theme, "Cleaning House: letting go and letting be." Last week we talked about the challenge of simplifying, of letting go of all the claims on our lives that draw us away from our holy center and our holy calling. We talked about the challenge of travelling light and letting go of that which creeps in and clutters the life we long to live both externally and internally. I can't tell you how many people told me about purges they are making in their homes this week. Great idea. Be sure to bring it all to the thrift store :). But it is not just a garage and closet thing. No it is also a thing of our internal world: a clearing out of the mind, the heart, and indeed the soul. Lent is a kind of a reset, a re-evaluation of the course of our lives, and an opportunity, having cleared away some of the noise, to look at the trade-offs we make in life and decide if indeed our life is ours- the one we are called to live.

Jesus has been with his disciples now for a couple of years, teaching, healing and confronting the religious and political powers and he is at the point where he can see a full out conflict ahead. And so he sits down with the disciples and tells them, tries to prepare them for what he and they must face- a deep letting go. "I will be arrested, handed over, killed, but God will not forsake me, and I will rise again." But Peter says no. "You can't be talking like this. We can win this one. It ought not to cost so much."

And here is where Jesus says, "you are setting your sights on human things" like gaining or conquering the world, but there is a cost to that too. I must walk the path that is mine to walk, the path of my deep calling, even if we must let go of this life, let go of winning, or achievement. There are more important things than survival. Yes, the path we choose here is a costly one. But so is choosing not to walk it- that choice would cost me my identity, my soul, and what will we have left after we have traded off our soul.

And to me, that is the penetrating question of the day. You see Jesus is laying out for us the call to clarity of the soul. I think I have told you the story of my mother, in a particularly tumultuous and changing time in my life, when life had just swept along, in a quiet moment asked me, "So Will, has your soul caught up with your life yet?" And ever since she said that, this little section of Mark has meant so much more to me. The soul is that core identity within us, that life essence, the thing that makes us who we are. In me, it is my soul that gives me my unique Will-ness. In you, it is your soul that makes you different than anyone who has ever walked this earth. It is the given-ness of who you are. Biologist and geneticists and psychologists have studied the many factors that coalesce to give us who we are- and then people of the sacred way look into the eyes and can see the soul at work behind the eyes. Our souls evolve over time as our life unfolds, and in the Christian life or the authentic life, the soul and the outer circumstances of our life are constantly trying to stay in sync, in integrity. When who we are, and what we are doing gets out of sync, that is when we are in trouble- when our soul and our life lose touch with each other. Lent is a season to clean the internal house to the degree that we can see the degree to which our soul and our life are in line- the degree to which we have given up soul for the sake of the world.

I believe Jesus is saying, friends, we can go down the path of trying to make something of ourselves, try to achieve greatness, try to achieve wealth or climb to the top of the market, and that may feel good for a while, but if in the process we lose touch with, or compromise who we are, we have lost the most precious thing we have- soul. Or it may be that in the process of dealing with the daily compromises, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune (as Shakespeare put it) we have made trade-offs and are carrying around a life that is not as much our's as it is an accumulation of the consequences of what has happened.

Peter Short used to talk about how people would come into the church he served carrying their lives in their hands. Sometimes they carry them like a fragile bird with a broken wing; sometimes their lives are carried heavily on their shoulders, like they are barely able to move given the heaviness of their lives; sometimes they hold them at a distance like a dirty smelly dishrag. We all carry our lives with us, and it is a beautiful thing and a beautiful moment when we carry our lives lightly, wear them like comfortable Saturday morning cloths. It happens every once in a while that the soul and the life are one.

That only happens when we have let go of the need to be somebody, the need to make something of ourselves, and we have simply decided to be who we are. Hassan can gain the whole world, but if he can no longer be transported home in the food he creates, he has give up too much. How about you? Is your soul ok with your life?

Amen.