



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“God so loved the World?”

Mark 1:9-15

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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.

Welcome to the season of Lent, the season of reflection in the church year modeled on the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. You know farmers live according to the seasons, and the seasons tell them what they should be doing when, and year after year they become better and better at following the patterns of the seasons. They pay attention to the signs. Farmers sense by the seasons, the lengthening of days and the warming of the land. The weather cycles mark a farmers days. They live within the ebb and flow of the unfolding natural story around them.

Tax accountants are the same, just a different story. I ran into Wayne Kyer yesterday and asked him how things are going as he moves into another tax season. It is the same every year, and he prepares for it, learns how to cope with it. A holiday at the end of it makes it more bearable. He lives within the cycles of the story of the tax year, and the ebb and flow of it.

Well Christians are the same. We have cycles and seasons, and we have just entered another one, Lent, the season that leads up to Holy week and Easter, 40 days mirroring the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism and blessing that we read about today. Christians live within the cycles of the Christian story; that is what marks our seasons, and in this time in the year, we begin a season of reflection, in some cases sober reflection, in which, within the story, we are moving through a period of time that has at its end the most harrowing episodes in Jesus' life. The story that we live within moves to the centre of power in Jerusalem, comes in conflict with the leaders, Jesus is arrested, tried, tortured, and finally executed on a cross, and after 3 days rises from the dead. That is the place in the story that this season leads us and we enter that part of the story today.

So what do you think about the story we are heading towards? How comfortable are you talking about the suffering of Jesus, and the cross, and what it means to you. I mean, if a friend or co-worker came up to you and said, “hay, I hear that you go to church. What is up with that Jesus dying on the cross business?” What would you say? Would it be an easy thing for you to talk about? For we who say we are Christians, followers of Jesus, the end part of his life is kind of crucial to our understanding of the whole thing. Do you know what you believe about it?

Have you ever seen this guy before? (show the image) I chuckle every time I see this scene of someone at a golf tournament or in the stands at a hockey game, or a football player who has it blazoned somewhere on his body. John 3:16. That's all it says. Do you know what it means? I am pretty sure this guy knows what it means to him, and it is shorthand for his core beliefs about the end of Jesus' life and its significance. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.” Now that is the reading that Peter Short next week will be speaking about and I don't want to steal his thunder but I just want to note that this guy wants you to know that for him, the story we are heading towards, the story of Jesus' suffering and death makes sense in this phrase..

God so loved the world. That is what makes sense of Jesus' suffering. God sent Jesus into the world because we have accumulated such a weight, such a burden of sin that has separated us so thoroughly from the presence of God that we cannot bridge the gap. The only way the gap can

be bridged is if someone who is without sin pays the most horrific price and in doing so, steps in and pays the price for our sin. That is one answer, and a common one, to the question, "What is up with that Jesus dying on the cross business?" I say it is one answer because it is the dominant one, but not the only answer. There are other answers to the significance of Jesus and his suffering and death- that story which lies at the end of this season.

We in the United Church have a bit of a reputation among Christians for being light on sin, uncertain about the cross and its significance, wishy-washy about Jesus. And that is because when someone says, "Jesus died for your sins," there is something in many of us which thinks, "Hm, have I been that bad? Have I done anything that is so bad that Jesus had to go through that? Really?" And so there is a kind of a disconnect. We think that we are supposed to believe it if we want to call ourselves Christian. I am here to tell you that there are other ways of living within this story, of holding sacred the path that Jesus walked.

For me, the cross has increased in meaning as life has moved along. When I was younger I found the cross to be a really troublesome central image of the faith. I mean, after all it is an instrument of execution. It is the symbol of the deadly power of an empire to impose its will. I remember one minister saying one time, "You might as well have an electric chair hanging up there as a cross." When I was younger I was uncomfortable with the cross as the central symbol of my faith. I wished we would walk around with empty tombs hanging around our necks instead of crosses- people of the resurrection, not the cross.

Life has taught me a few things though, about suffering, about man's inhumanity to man, and about God's presence in the middle of all that. I do not believe that Jesus had to die this way for him to fulfill God's need for payment for our sin. That God would sacrifice God's child for the sake of the sin of others doesn't ring true to me, feels abusive. In fact I can't sing the third verse of How Great Thou Art because I find it leaves me cold. "And when I think that God, his son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in. That on the cross my burden gladly bearing. He bled and died to take away my sin." I just can't sing it, because I cannot square a loving God with a God that would require such suffering. That is not my God, and it is not my theology of the cross.

However, the cross has become a central symbol of my faith even without this sacrifice theology. For me, Jesus was a human being who so deeply embodied the love to which we are all called, so deeply revealed the light of God that it so threatened the powers of greed and self interest and control that they killed him- not because God needed that to happen, but because the love he stood for threatened their power. The cross is a symbol of what can happen when we fully embrace, and fully commit ourselves to the radical love of God, as Jesus did- it will be threatening. To me the cross is a constant reminder that the radical love of God can sometimes, even often cost us dearly.

But the cross is empty. The story does not end with the cross. No there is more. God does not leave it there. Suffering and death may come but as in Jesus, God will see us through, and death is not the final chapter. In love there is a power greater than suffering and death. I have seen it. I have seen it as people face death, and there is a sense that people die but love doesn't. We have seen it in the courageous lives of people like Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Oscar Romero, Terry Fox and so many others who refuse to let death have ultimate power over them. There is something eternally significant about their and our refusal to let the crosses we have to bear have the last word in our lives. I have seen it every time a person refuses to give up on the power of love in their life.

"What's up with this Jesus dying on the cross business?" For me it is about the power of love in the face of suffering and death. It is about the courage to say, not my will but thy will be done, and about God's victory of love. Amen