



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"A love as wide as God"

Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35

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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

I want to start this week with one of my favorite philosophers of real life, the man most famous for saying, "It ain't over til its over." Yogy Berra, one of the great baseball players and managers f all time also said when it was discovered he was no longer going to Ruggeri's, a St. Louis restaurant: "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded." He was also the one who said to Joe Garagiola when giving his directions to his home which was accessible by two routes, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." My personal favorite piece of deep but practical advice is "Always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't go to yours."

Well, fun philosophy aside, Yogi Berra is watch baseball great Joe Garagiola step to the plate. Before assuming his stance, fervent Roman Catholic Joe takes his bat and makes the sign of the cross in the dirt in front of home plate. Catcher Yogi Berra, playing catcher at the time, also a devout Catholic, walks over and erases Garagiola's cross. Turning to the astonished batter, Berra smiles and says, "Let's let God watch this inning."

You know your God is far too small when you've diminished God to the size of your team.

There was an old Quaker who broke the silence of the meeting one day when he stood and told his fellow Friends about a young man who was not a Quaker and who lived an undisciplined life. This young man invited a devout Quaker friend to go sailing one day. A sudden storm came up and the wild young man was drowned. Having made his point, the old Quaker sat down.

Silence returned to the meeting until the old man once again arose. This time he said, "Friends, for the honor of the truth, I think I ought to add that the Quaker also drowned."

You know your God is far too small when you've diminished God's love to the circle you know and love.

Peter has grown up steeped in the ancient dietary laws of his tradition. He has been told since he can remember, that there are things we in this community eat and other things are forbidden for us. Gentiles may eat things like meat from animals with a cloven hoof, and from seafood like shellfish. But we Jews, we are known by and our community is held together by the choices we make about what we eat and what is forbidden by our God. And its not just the rules. These ancient ways remind us who we are. They put boundaries around our community. They give life edges and remind us that we belong to God.

And then he finds himself in an argument. There are gentiles joining the Jesus movement and they have different ways. They eat all kinds of things that God has always forbidden the community to eat. Yet they seem to have had a genuine experience of the Spirit of the God of Jesus. He can't deny that. So what is he to do? Stick with the tradition, or break the rules.

And then he has a dream, this wild dream of a sheet and food, all manner of forbidden food lowered down from heaven. And the voice which says, take and eat. What God has made clean, you must not call unclean. And he wakes up, and he realizes that the faith he had been practicing, and the god he had imagined was far too small.

Jesus gathers his disciples just before he is to head into Jerusalem. He knows things may not go well, and he knows he may not come out of it. So he sits them down and tells them some of the most important things they will ever hear. Things like, I will not leave you orphaned, and I go to prepare a place for you, and today's message, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The love that you share will point to a very large God- a God that is not bound by traditions that separate us, by language that entangles us, by partisan loyalties that make love small. No, the love that you will share, the love that I have shown you, that you will be known for is a very big love, and it will challenge you to step beyond your place of comfort. It will challenge you to expand your heart and mind, and your circle of friends.

We are in the midst of a provincial election, and we have been asked by our Christian Reformed Church neighbors if we would like to co-host an all candidates forum. Looks like it is going to happen. And here is our chance folks. At a time when our adversarial system is pumping out adds that make the dialogue small and petty, we have the chance to be known by the breadth of our love. Oh we can surely ask the big hard questions, we can challenge the candidates to show us the morality of their economic policy. We can put forward the value of God's creation as a primary in determining public policy. We can place our gospel values on the table. But we can do it in a way that honours the bigness of our God.

I know that devotion can be a wondrous and beautiful thing. But the prominent role religions have historically played in wars and brutality over the ages bears witness to the diminishment of our hearts, our minds, our communities, and frankly, our faith. When I imagine a god so small as to favor those who think like me, worship like me and act like me, whose politics fit mine, then I reveal little about them, and much about the smallness of my faith and my God. Yogi Berra also said "You can observe a lot by watching." Jesus said people will be watching and what they observe will tell them a lot. "They will know you are my followers by the breadth, the depth and the quality of your love." That is a challenge to a radical expansion of our hearts, our minds and our theology. Thanks be to God. Amen