



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Vanilla: Works for ice cream but not for faith”

2 Samuel 1:1,17-27 Mark 5:21-43

Will Sparks June 28, 2015

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 am a dessert guy. Anybody else out there a dessert person. I was talking to someone this week who had recovered almost completely after a long illness, and they were doing well, except two things had not come back: their appetite and of all things, their sense of taste. And I can't imagine which would be worse. If I lose my sense of taste though, I actually kind of hope I also lose my appetite, since taste, in my books, matters. Someone else I told me that for them food is primarily fuel, and I have to say, not for me. For me, the taste that matters most comes after the main course, and the very best ones have at least a passing acquaintance with chocolate. Any dessert with the words “double chocolate” in the name has my devotion. I can identify with the woman who once said that she loved chocolate so much that when she died she didn't want to be embalmed, she wanted to be dipped.

Where am I going with this, you ask? Well, C.S. Lewis, author of the famous Narnia Chronicles and many other deeply faithful Christian books once said, “vibrant Christianity never comes in plain vanilla.” And that is apparently something that needed saying, for the poet Garcia Grindal, speaking to a group of church leaders and would-be preachers, said something similar: “Your gospel is so exciting, and you are so dull!”

Forget dessert for a moment, and think about the life of the faith community, and the life of the United Church. That's an appropriate focus for our attention because we are coming to the end of our program year and we are in a time of transition (as if there are times that are not transitory) and thinking about the next stage in our congregation's life. As well, the National Gathering of the United Church will take place this summer, and will discuss the shape of the United Church for the coming years. What ought to be the flavor of our life together as a church? What ought to be the tone that we are trying to set?

Some would say that vanilla is just fine thank you very much; that we have our taste buds on permanent spasm because of the many strange, new, and often unsettling things that come our way all the time. Our children present us with moral dilemmas that we never heard of, much less dreamed we would face in our families, the way families are put together seems to be changing on a daily basis and it can be hard to find our way through all the shapes and flavors, our political leaders are wooing us already in preparation for a fall election, trying to cast aspersions on the other flavors. Here's one I can never get right: the length of your shorts- down below the knee a couple of years ago, and now, oh dear, they have gone way up! The dollar is down and then up. We sometimes go to Mario's Gelato when we are downtown, the place with, what is it, 218 flavours. And we go around and try them with the little spoons and try and trick each other into trying ghastly ones like wasabi, and oyster and garlic. But there is every flavor imaginable-enough to make you retreat to vanilla. George Will had something when he said, “sauerkraut is fine, and ice cream is fine, but sauerkraut ice cream?” Dazzling variety. If only the church could be a vanilla place, an oasis of sameness in a desert of change, a place with no surprises, a refuge from the startling, the unsettling, the new, the trendy.

Now to be clear, I love vanilla. The only kind allowed on my rhubarb crisp. But we know vanilla churches don't we, churches afflicted with ‘terminal niceness.’ A friend of mine visited

Norway one time and found the orderliness oppressive. Everything was either mandatory or illegal. He longed for surprise, innovation, creativity, not just for their own sake but as a sign of life. Anything but vanilla!

Did you catch any sense of vanilla in the stories we read from the bible. Certainly no emotional vanilla. It is hard to capture the full sense of David's lament over his best mate Jonathan and his arch rival father Saul: Mighty warriors fallen. Fallen! No more dew or rain for you, hills of Gilboa, and not a drop from springs and wells, for there the warriors shields were dragged through the mud, Saul's shield left there to rot... Oh my dear friend Jonathan, I'm crushed by your death. Your friendship was a miracle-wonder... The mighty warriors- fallen, fallen." This is the hot passion of grief, bitter in the mouth. Nothing vanilla here. Just pure understandable grief poured out like fine wine.

And if that isn't flavorful enough for you, how about those two intertwined stories from the gospel about the grieving father whose beloved daughter is at death's door who seeks Jesus' help, and while he was on his way to make the house call, this other poor woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years, unobtrusively tried to reach him. Now we need to remember that menstruating women, according to Hebrew law, were unclean, and anyone like this woman would have been a pariah for most of her adult life. So, at the end of her rope, she reaches out and touches his clothes, and knows that she is healed! So does Jesus. For he knows that power had gone out of him and he addresses her, and sends her on her way rejoicing. And as if that isn't enough, he goes on and restores the daughter of the president of the synagogue to health and then has to remind them to stop fluttering about and give the poor kid something to eat.

Friends, you are not going to find anything better than this on the wildest episodes of Dr. Phil. Not a drop of vanilla in the whole batch. For these are stories about people like us, people experiencing the whole gamut of human emotions: anger, guilt, fear, ecstasy, believing that they have come into the presence of the God of the universe, and daring to be honest and real there.

Can we be a community of this kind of honesty. People have said to me, I like it here. You talk about life as it is- real issues. And we have said that we long to be a place of belonging. Well friends, belonging if it is real needs to include the whole gamut of life, all flavors of experience. If we are to be a place of belonging, then we need to make sure that real issues are talked about, real emotions are welcome, real spicy lives are shared. We need to be a place where honesty really is a core value- a staple of our diet. We need to be a place where we are as free to air our doubt and uncertainty as we share our hope and confidence. We need to be a place where we not only come together but come apart and that is ok because honestly, coming apart is never vanilla. We need to be a place where we not only offer food to the hungry but venture to ask in a country such as ours, why in heaven's name are so many people, children included, so consistently and predictably hungry? That's not a vanilla question.

Can the community of faith, this United Church of ours be one in which worship, that all-consuming offering of our self to God is at the center of life, and it's spicy? The reason we gather is not primarily to have fellowship with one another- there are all kinds of places in the world that can happen, and not primarily to engage together in works of charity and justice. No the founding impetus for both our community life and the good we do in the community is the experience of God's presence, God's spirit, that spice of life that gives rise to everything else which makes us feel like we belong to something far bigger than ourselves.

Some years ago, the World Council of churches met in Vancouver, out at UBC- 18 days in which thousands gathered under tents for honest conversation and for worship- to be in the presence of God, people from all over the world. The worship was varied, rich, and anything but vanilla. And as the final gathering ended, one of the security guards said to another, "Well, these people may be communists, but they sure know how to worship."

So as William Sloan Coffin put it "May God give you grace never to sell yourself short. Grace to risk something big for something good. Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love. May God take your minds, and think through them. May God take your lips, and speak through them. May God take your hearts, and set them on fire." And may that be everything even including vanilla.