



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Called to rise”

Luke 13:10-17, Jeremiah 1:4-11

Will Sparks August 25, 2013

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 may not be, all that you are. I may not be a shining star, but what I am, I thank you God for making me your child.”

James Aggrey tells the story of a certain man who went through the forest seeking any bird of interest he might find. He caught a young eagle, brought it home and put it among the chickens and ducks and turkeys, gave it chicken food to eat, even though it was an eagle, king of all birds.

Five years later a naturalist came to visit and, after passing through the garden said, “What is that bird doing among your chickens. An eagle doesn’t belong among the chickens.”

“Yes,” said the owner. “but I have trained it to be a chicken. It is no longer an eagle, it is a chicken, even though it measures 8 feet from tip to tip of its wings.”

“No,” said the naturalist. “It is an eagle still; it has the heart of an eagle, and I will help it to soar high up in the heavens.”

“No,” said the owner. “It is a chicken. It believes it is a chicken and it will never fly.”

They agreed to test it. The naturalist picked up the eagle, held it up and said with great intensity, “Eagle, thou art an eagle; thou dost belong to the sky and not to this earth; stretch forth thy wings and fly.”

The eagle turned this way and that in bewilderment, and then, seeing the chickens eating their food, dropped down.

“You see, I told you. For all intents and purposes it is a chicken,” said the owner.

“No,” said the naturalist. “It is an eagle. Give it another chance tomorrow.”

So the next day he took it to the top of the house and said, “Eagle, thou art an eagle; stretch forth thy wings and fly.” But again the eagle, seeing the chickens, dropped down and fed among the chickens.

“I’m telling you. You may see it as an eagle, but it is now a chicken.”

“No,” insisted the naturalist. “It is an eagle and it has the heart of an eagle. Only give it another chance and I will help it fly tomorrow.”

The next morning he arose early and took the eagle outside the city and away from all houses, to the foot of a high mountain. The sun was just rising, gilding the top of the mountain with gold...

He picked up the eagle and said, “Eagle, thou art an eagle; thou dost belong to the sky, and not to this earth; stretch forth thy wings and fly.” The eagle looked around feeling a tremor going through its body, but it did not fly. The naturalist then made it look straight into the sun. Suddenly it stretched out its wings and, with a screech of an eagle, mounted the wind, higher and higher. Having tasted the wind, it never returned. Though it had been kept and tamed as a chicken, it would always be an eagle.

We don’t know the particulars of the story of the crippled woman who had a spirit that had bent her double for 18 years. We don’t know the physical or emotional or spiritual dis-ease that had caused her to be so bent out of shape for so long. And she did not ask to be healed; she was just there. But Jesus saw her. I wonder how visible she had been to that point or whether she

was one who, over the years had become invisible. Jesus saw her and called her into the middle of the community, and proclaimed her free of all that burdened her, touched her and helped her unfold to the full extent of the stature that was in her.

We are given a clue to exactly what might have burdened her over the years when a religious leader bursts in and chastises Jesus for breaking the rules by curing on the Sabbath. I love Jesus' response, "You hypocrite. You treat your animals with dignity and provide for them the things they need for life on the Sabbath. You untie them on the Sabbath but you will not allow this woman, this daughter of Abraham, to be unbound from her affliction on the Sabbath?" And the people say, "Amen."

She had a spirit that crippled her. It doesn't say she had a medical condition, a physical ailment, although her crippling was physical. And I wonder, if each of us were asked to describe the things we carry, the spirits that accompany us through our lives, are there any burdensome, crippling elements to our spirit- memories that won't let go, images of ourselves that limit our full humanity, experiences that taught us to walk sheepishly bent over, stories that we had repeated to us about ourselves and our world that we believed, and in believing, limited our horizon. These are the very things Jesus calls us to lay down so that we might move in to the full tall humanity for which we were created.

In the coming month, Vancouver is hosting large gatherings of the Truth and Reconciliation commission, called together to bring healing to the lives and experience of aboriginal people who attended government sponsored and church run residential schools. Some of you may remember elder and church leader Alvin Dixon coming here last fall to talk about his life in residential schools and the process that he calls truth, healing, and reconciliation. And there is a huge irony in the fact that one element of our participation in the residential school process was the intention of the church to help- we mistakenly judged indian culture as the thing that held aboriginal people down and that adopting white culture would help them rise to their full stature. We could not have been more wrong, and as a result, we stole from them the very God given identity to which they are called. We have an opportunity to participate in the healing. We have an opportunity to be part of a process of truth and reconciliation by which aboriginal survivors of residential school abuse can rise to the full height of their God given stature. Because our churches played a key role in crippling them, our presence, our honest listening, and our humble acknowledgement of their experience can make a huge difference in their healing- in their rising to the full height of their God given stature.

My first ministry placement was in the small Kootenay town of Nakusp. I served three little churches up and down the Arrow Lakes. The people of this valley were the first ones to really teach me how to be a minister. I've been learning ever since. I have a friend who lives in Nakusp who says to me as she contemplates reading scripture on Sunday, or preparing with a family for a funeral of a loved one, "Will, it is your fault you know. You got me into all this." And when she says that I have to smile because she and I both know that she has simply stepped into the fullness of ministry to which God called her. It actually wasn't me. It is true that I challenged her, and I didn't accept that she was unworthy or unable. But really it was her own heart that, in time, simply rejected the smaller vision of her life and her ministry.

And I believe that is exactly what can happen for each one of us as we allow ourselves to hear the voice of Jesus saying to us, stand up, stand tall, rise to the full height of your God-given stature. And it is my vision for the church that we be a place and a community where we are so immersed in the message and Spirit of God's love for all creation that regularly for each one of us and for us together, small visions lose their lustre and become inadequate. As we immerse ourselves in the words of Jeremiah "...before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." God knows us deeply and calls us to our fullest humanity, and our church is to be a place and a community in which there is healing for the crippling spirits that

bend us down, and where all people are set free for the sake of the life God has placed within them.

We are to be dispensers of the balm of Gilead, a place where people come and receive the real goods, the transforming power of love. A place where people come and are called out of any small selves they inhabit, and into their full selves and into fullness of life. A place where people come and realize their full worth, daughter of Abraham, , inheritor of the fullness of God, disciple of Christ and child of the living God.

“There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole...”