



Sermons

from Northwood United Church

“A Community Outside the Walls”

Acts 16:9-15

Will Sparks

May 5, 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

Back when I was in training for ministry I took a summer job in Victoria at the street ministry that was then called the Open Door. It was a morning and afternoon drop in centre in an upstairs corner of Metropolitan United Church. Hard to get to for even the fit, but utterly wheelchair inaccessible, so I got into the habit of taking my lunch hour and doing a walk about to key places in the downtown where I might find some of our people. Most who came to the Open Door were either homeless or living in terrible little rooms in and around the downtown core. Life on the street for our community was hard and harsh but there truly was community there. People took care of each other, kept an eye out. I could ask, has anybody seen Irvin these days and someone would either tell me what was going on or tell me their best guess where I might find him. We liked to think of the Open Door as the “livingroom” for people who had no home. You couldn’t sleep there, so it wasn’t the bedroom, and we didn’t have much more than a snack counter, so it wasn’t the kitchen, but you could hang out there and visit. It was the livingroom.

And somehow it was church- like real church. Allan Tysic, the minister that came there some time after I was gone tells the story of doing one of his early morning walkabouts and finding one of the members of the community sitting on a curb, still feeling the effects of the night before. This is a person Allan had not seen and was worried about. So he came over and sat down on the curb beside the person and asked how he was. He was living rough, and it was hard. He wasn’t healthy, hadn’t slept well, and clearly needed to go to detox if he was going to make it much longer. So they talked, and Allan encouraged him to make a change. He hoped it was a conversation that would help him turn things around. And then, before Allan got up and continued on his way, he pulled a day old bun he had picked up for the snack counter later, and broke it and gave it to the man and said, “This is my body broken for you. We do this in remembrance of Jesus. And the guy took the cap of the bottle of cheap wine left over from the night before, filled the cap and they shared it. This the the cup of blessing, my lifeblood poured out for you. We do this in remembrance of Jesus. And although I have no idea whether this man turned things around that day or any day afterwards, in that moment, the good news, the blessing of Christ’s healing presence was felt mightily by both Allan and this man in the sharing of communion on a curb in Victoria. Church happened.

Paul has been wandering around wondering where he is called to go with this relatively newfound urgency to his mission. His life has been turned utterly around by the gospel and the Spirit and he is compelled to share that with others. After some wandering, he has a dream that he must go to Macedonia. So he make the best version of a bee line that he could make at the time to the Roman city of Philippi, where he is stalled once again until he makes his way outside the city walls to a place where God is being worshipped. Now I am not exactly sure what was going on there, but it is clear that an eclectic group of women came there to pray together. These are people seeking God, but clearly struggling. Because when Paul arrives and tells them of the Gospel, it finds fertile ground in a businesswoman named Lydia.

Lydia has a lot going for her. She is a dealer in purple, rich people's cloth. She has a home in a Roman city. But she goes outside the walls to a group of women in search of something to fill her spiritual hunger. And it is there that she is fed by a gospel that will inspire her to be the matriarch and founding mother of the church in Europe. There, outside the walls among a cluster of spiritually hungry women, church happened.

Three weeks ago a group of 25-30 people, members of our church, gathered here to have what we called "Conversations that matter." Deborah and I had been talking over a year or so about the fact that we have some significant changes going on in our church, building, new ministries, amalgamation with the Japanese church, and if ever there is a time when you need to be really clear what we are here for, now is the time. So we thought it important to gather some people together, outside the usual board meetings or worship gatherings, and have a different conversation about what we are here for. What difference are we called to make as a community.

The conversation was, at first, kind of uncomfortable. It took us a while to warm up to the process. Clearly, our guide, Chris Corrigan was for making us a little that way in order to open us up to what really matters about Northwood. We took a moment to remember a time when this church, Northwood had really made a difference in us, where church had really happened. And at a certain point in the conversation the pieces started to fall into place. It's about being learners, and living Christ's teachings in grounded practice. It's about experiencing the all-embracing love of God. It's about paying close attention to the patterns God uses to generate life.

It's about being a home where people can find a collective Christian identity, make meaning, and belong. And it's about finding the power to live life abundantly and embrace our community.

Now these are lovely words, and I encourage you to look at them on the board in the gathering area and talk about what parts of it you find inspiring to your faith, because what we discovered in our conversation is that in some way, every one of us gathered there had experienced God's love and life in these ways within this community. Home, belonging, all-embracing, the teachings lived and learned and practiced. Church has happened, and there is great excitement to do whatever it takes to make it happen again and again for people who are searching for God in their lives.

I wonder where church happens for you. And when I say church has happened, I mean where you have found your way home in community, where that the hunger within you has found bread, the thirst in you has been quenched, the longing in you for meaning and for home has been satisfied, more than satisfied, where you have found life is abundant, overflowing. I wonder where that is in your life. Because that is what I mean by church happening, and that is what we are here for. And frankly, Paul wandered the mediteranian world until God made it happen outside the walls of Philippi. Allan wandered around the streets of Victoria until God made it happen on a curb with a day old bun and a capful of cheap wine. And many of us have done church all over the place but it is God who makes it happen when it happens here and everywhere it happens.

And so we gather around the table, and we give thanks to God for the ways church has happened for us and our tribe in the past, we break open our lived in prayer and then we break open the bread and pour the cup, and pray that God will once again, make us church, really church, life-giving, life changing, abundant church today. Amen.