



## **Sermons** **from Northwood United Church**

**“Living but not alive”**  
**Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9**  
**Will Sparks                      March 3, 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 don't know whether I ever told you folks that I used to be a bee keeper. My shop is still full of bee keeping equipment in case some day I get the chance to pick it up again. I loved it, and it's a lot of work if you want to do it well. The honey is lovely, the bees wax candles you can make are fabulous, but the thing I loved the most was just being out there with them, surrounded by the buzz and the smell of nectar and wax and feeling this closeness with something that was so alive. And of course, tending a hive also means that this is a cluster of bees giving life to a whole neighborhood through pollination.

I had a friend with a pear tree with a problem. It was healthy and everything, but it was just not producing pears the way it was supposed to. Two pears one year. Problem? No bees. I stood under it during blossom season when it should have been just buzzing, and there was nothing going on. She wanted me to bring a hive over and put it in her yard and see what happened. Can these trees change- become truly alive the way fruit trees are supposed to be- alive, productive?

She had a plan B, and that was to go down the road to a neighbor, take a blossoming branch from someone else's orchard and basically rub it up against the blossoms on her trees. When she told me this I laughed imagining her as this kind of sex therapist for trees.

But in all seriousness, there is a problem when trees are living but not fully alive. Life is more than making it through another cycle of the seasons. Life is about participating, bearing fruit not just putting in time. Human beings are thirsty for aliveness, the elements of life that proclaim fullness, richness, abundance. And if we are just putting in time, or just barely making it through instead of being alive, then something has to change. If there are members of our communities who feel like they have no option but to coast, put in time, just make it through, be that because they are poor or elderly, or isolated or whatever, then collectively we must change so that all can participate, all can be fully alive.

That is what I love so much about this part of Isaiah. The boisterous proclamation: “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters! And you who have no money, come buy and eat!” Hey! There are no barriers to participation in God's life! Yo! Join the dance!

Isaiah was written to a people in exile, a people cut off from their nation, their land, their temple, everything they knew that showed them God was with them. Oh they knew they were still living, but without their God, life felt empty, barren. Their life was the lament, “How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land.” Why is this happening to us? We are just going to have to hunker down and get through this.

And Isaiah proclaims with exuberance, “Yo. Wake up! God is not dead or gone. God;s ways are more mysterious and wonderful than all that. The feast of life is right here!”

Events felt similarly desperate around Jesus. In the time of our gospel reading Pilate had recently gone ballistic and executed a whole synagogue full of people because they refused to turn over the temple treasury as a donation to one of his building projects. And they came to Jesus. “Why is this happening? What did they do to deserve that?” Nothing, says Jesus, but unless things turn around, repent, unless we turn around, it will happen to us too. “And that thing

that happened, that disaster where the tower fell on the people, why? What did they do?" Nothing. But unless there is a great turnaround, this will keep happening.

In both bits of news, the atrocities of a crazed leader and natural disaster, what Jesus wants people to focus on, irrespective of the immediate cause, is that people died a premature death, and everyone felt that. Everyone felt the tragedy of that. These people died before they had truly and properly lived, and that is truly a tragedy. There is the real link to the fig tree part of the reading. How many are like the fig tree: kind of alive but not enjoying the full potential of their productivity, missing the creative possibility that God intends and in danger of coming to their end before they have truly lived, missing the gift of aliveness that is really in front of us?

Nora Gallagher, in her book "Things seen and unseen" writes of her experience of coming back to faith and waking up to the life that was right before her, that she was missing. They had a soup kitchen in their church and for the longest time they offered the food through a kind of window to the outside. But on a particularly cold day, someone said, "Wait a minute. This isn't right. These people should come in from the cold and sit and eat inside." That was the beginning of the awakening.

So after that, people came inside for the meal. And there was no problems. So for some months they stood behind tables and offered the food, and the folks came in and ate, mostly silently.

Then one day, Nora noticed at one table there were 4 men and one well-dressed woman eating the same food. The woman was one of the volunteers at the soup kitchen. She decided to try that. So one day she took a tray of food, and awkwardly sat down at a table with six men. A few nodded. Others stared ahead.

The world series was on, and the previous night, the game had been an exciting one: the longest in series history. There was a conversation opener, she thought.

She writes: "See the game last night?" I said, expectantly.

Several pairs of turned toward me. No one spoke. Finally a huge man with an Abe Lincoln beard whom I later came to know as Alan asked, "What game?"

"The world series"

"Oh. Is that on now?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, less confidently now. "It was a great game."

"I don't really watch tv," said another man. "I prefer to read."

"Yeah," said Alan. "Or I watch PBS. There is a good series on German Impressionism on right now." The awakening continues.

Some weeks later, after the habit of standing behind the counter was truly broken and the habit of actually eating at the tables was settling in, Nora arrived late and fresh from working outside. She slipped in to the line and then received her food. The volunteers looked at her, eyes shining with pity. She began to explain but then thought better of it. She sat down at the table with Greg and Alan. Greg said, "What did Robin Hood say to Maid Marion when she asked him if he wanted to live with her in the forest?"

"I don't know." She replied.

"Sure would," he said. And they both laughed. Awakening complete.

I believe we are hungry for bread that really satisfies, thirsty for the waters of life, longing for life that is really alive. To repent of our deadness. To become fully alive. That is why we engage in spiritual practice. That is the purpose of this season of Lent. To wake up to the fruit-bearing life to which we are called. Amen