



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**“The Hunger Games: Will you play?”**

**Mark 4:26-34**

**Will Sparks**

**June 17, 2012**

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.

Jim Taylor once told the story of a waitress he saw once who darted back and forth behind the counter in the crowded Vancouver coffee shop- zip,zip,zip, like one of those wind-up toys that change direction every time they run into something. She was as efficient as a machine and with about as much personality.

Moments after you sat down she clattered a cup of coffee in front of you. A minute later her progress along the counter would jerk to a halt in front of you. She said neither hello nor good morning. She didn't smile or wish you a nice day which perhaps was a bit of a relief but she didn't even look up. She grunted, “yes.” Her tone of voice made it clear that you had better have made up your mind what you wanted.

Not even a nod of her head acknowledged that she had heard your order. She simply started up her engine and jerked away. Then, sooner or later, something more or less resembling what you had ordered skipped on to the counter in front of you.

Then, without warning, a customer, who was almost through his initial coffee, actually spoke to her. “Miss?” he called as she trundled past. “You didn't take my order.”

Well it was like he had pulled her plug. She stopped and the cup of coffee she was carrying slid off her tray and smashed onto the floor. It was almost as if she had shattered with the cup.

She looked right at him, spoke right to him, and revealed the human being somewhere under the layers of work-day habits. “I'm sorry sir. I thought I'd asked you and you only wanted coffee.” And there it was! The human in there, the life, the person. There was a soul in there behind those eyes, distracted and worn down by the grind of the day, unable to pay attention to her primary life task of becoming the soul she was made to be. The struggle for life.

Jesus said, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. And if you have ever seen a mustard seed you will know that there is not much to it. Tiny hard little thing. Could never amount to anything, you'd think, let alone grow up and become the greatest of all shrubs. But there are a few things you need to know about mustard seeds in Jesus' day. It was a weed, it wasn't a crop It was the purple loosestrife of Jesus' day. A farmer's nightmare. A dandelion if you will. The bamboo of the small shrub world. And Jesus says, the kingdom of God, the unfolding life and love and justice of God as God would have it, is like a mustard seed. It doesn't look like much, but it spreads, under the radar of domination, be it Roman domination, military, economic domination, it is a contagion that spreads, and before you know it, there is a lot of shoots popping up all over the place.

The Northwood Reads book club has been reading “The Hunger Games,” and this past week got together to discuss it. How many have read this best-selling youth fiction book?

So to bring you up to speed, this book is a phenomenon. The first in a trilogy by Suzanne Collins, in March there were 36.5 million copies in print. The movie grossed \$68 million on opening night and within three days had grossed over \$155 million. But Suzanne Collins has not just hit on a money maker. I believe she has tapped into the underlying conflict and worry of our culture right now. Her book and movie is one of a number of dystopian books and movies that

address apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes. 2012 was the end of the world right? Planetary disasters, plagues, super-heroes battling everything from aliens to demonic powers. It is not new but it is common and the common worry underneath it all in the culture is that things are not going well: environmentally, economically. In the older generations the worry is, what is the legacy we have left our children and what kind of life will they have. In the younger generations the worry is, is there any point in getting with the program when I can't necessarily count on the earth and the economy to hold up. Would I be better off taking to the streets of Montreal, Wall Street, Bay Street or any other street that represents the powers in my world. Suzanne Collins has put her finger on that worry pulsing through our culture.

The Hunger Games tells of a world, Panem, in Latin meaning "bread" where there has been an attempted revolution against the dominating power of "The Capitol." The economic and military might of the Capitol has descended on the 12 remaining districts who now live in poverty, feeding the ridiculously lavish and outlandish appetites of the Capitol. And one of the mechanisms of control by the Capitol is the yearly games in which two 12-18 year olds from each district are chosen to come to the arena in the Capitol and represent their district in a fight to the death. One child will emerge alive and become a mentor for future contestants. It is a ghastly idea, but I have to say, once past the initial shock of the concept, the game, and all the catch 22s and impossible situations it creates, the way its competitive core pits people against each other, and forces them to betray their own humanity, oh it sounded far too familiar.

One of the protagonists, Peeta, the night before he must enter the arena and fight for his life shares with Katniss, the heroin, his belief that he will not survive. "That's no way to be thinking," She says. "Why not. Its true. My best hope is to not disgrace myself and ..." "And what?" she asks. "I don't know how to say it exactly. Only... I want to die as myself. Does that make sense?" She shakes her head. How could he die as anyone but himself? "I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I am not.... I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to... to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I am more than just a piece in their Games..."

He wants to find a way to live and fight and die soulfully, to not be stripped of his humanity, of the thing that makes him human, of his soul in the process. He knows he is just a mustard seed, but there is something in him that says, "small, but not insignificant." Don't we all. Don't we all wish to find a way that our economic wellbeing is not dependent on the poverty of others. Isn't there something dehumanizing about an economy that requires a large number of us be poor so that a small number of us can be rich. Isn't there something dehumanizing about a world in which our addiction to fossil fuels will environmentally impoverish our own grandchildren? And don't we all, knowing we have to live in this world, want to live it in a humanizing way, because we know that there is something our systems can't touch.

Perhaps the Jesus message seemed faint in his day. I know it seems faint these days amid the sea changes that are taking place. The message of the Kingdom of God is lost amid the messages of the kingdom of the almighty dollar, the kingdom of political power, the kingdom of reality TV, the kingdom of military power. We are small. And when you think of it, even Jesus didn't do anything too grand. He didn't drive out the legions of Rome or mount a revolution. No he simply planted a whole lot of mustard seeds, he scattered the contagion of radical love and boundless grace within the earthy souls of Galilean peasants. He turned people to look within themselves and within each other and to see something different, at the preciousness of their humanity, their God given soul, that puny little seed inside that no one can ever take away, no system will ever totally crush.

Kenny, Alexis, Meris, Emily, Haley, Ariel, Elysa, Melissa. (The grads) Nurture that mustard seed of humanity, of soul within you for it is precious and powerful. It can break

through any dehumanizing layer of loveless concrete that the world and life may send your way.  
Amen