



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Lives laid down in love"

John 15:9-17

Will Sparks

May 10, 2015

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.

First loves are always memorable aren't they. They hold a special place in our hearts. And for ministers there is a special place in our hearts for our first communities in ministry. Mine was three little churches in the Arrow Lakes and I like to tell people that I spent 4 years in seminary to learn how to be a minister, only to find myself in the Arrow Lakes where the long suffering faithful who had seen more than their fair share of fresh faces newly minted ministers taught me how to be a real minister. I remember after 5 years in Arrow Lakes saying to somebody, "I think I am starting to get this." I have a special place in my heart for these people.

There's a Lutheran minister in Atlanta, Timothy Smith who tells the story of his first church and what he learned there.

In his first rural parish he, like many of us, was as a young whippersnapper of a pastor and he regularly used as his example of what we ought not to sing the hymn "In the Garden." Why would Christians, whose biblical faith values community far above individualism and who have heard Jesus' explicit command to deny self and live for others, why would we ever sing, "He walks with me, talks with me, tells me I am his own"? Some years later, a Baptist clergy helped knock him off his high horse when he heard Tim's rant about that hymn and quoted some familiar words: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters," and so on.

Touché! Of course, we have a personal relationship with God, but still, I think "private" is rarely a helpful word in communities of faith. Well one night in Tim's first parish, he was called to the hospital by the family of an elderly parishioner who was struggling in his last hours. He rushed to the hospital, and waited for all of his children to arrive; and when all of them were there, they held hands around his bed and commended him to God's care. This dear old salt-of-the-earth farmer looked up and smiled, and then he spoke. He spoke last words. Sacred, Holy ground. "I love every one of you. I'm ready to go. And I love Pastor Tim, too, and I love his voice and I know he'll sing "In the Garden" for you at my funeral." And then he died. Through tears, the oldest son looked at Tim and said, "Thank you, Pastor. Daddy always loved that song!"

Now there is proof that God has a sense of humor: First of all, we don't sing solos at funerals. But that principle got trumped, trumped by love and the power of last words. So that at this old guy's funeral, with three clergy colleagues smirking in the front row, he sang, "and He walks with me and he talks with me." The whole thing. With feeling. Last words are holy, compelling.

In a little-known letter written by a Rhode Island soldier to his wife Sarah, Major Sullivan Ballew, had a premonition of his own death, and he wrote to his wife:

"The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days, perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eyes when I shall be no more. Sarah, my love for you is deathless. It seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but omnipotence could break. The memories of the blissful moments that I have spent with you come creeping over me. I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them for so long, and hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes

the hopes of future years when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grown up to honorable manhood around us. If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name.

The imminence of death is indeed sacred ground, and in those moments we cling to last words in hopes of gleaned some meaning, some promise, some legacy. Every transition, every transformation, is a death of sorts, as well as a new birth. And there are special words for births and marriages and graduations, but dying words are in a league of their own. How about you? If you could say just a few last words as you knew you were dying, to whom would they be addressed and what would they be? I'm guessing that somewhere in those last words would be a heartfelt "I love you," as well as some sincere request like "take care of your brother," or "live your life." Something like that.

Chapters 13-17 of John's gospel are Jesus' earthly life last words to his disciples as he prepares them for a major transition. Something new, namely, the ministry of the disciples and the church, is about to be born; and as with all births, something, namely Jesus himself, has to die. In that holy ground context, Jesus says, "As my Papa has loved me, so I love you, and so you should love one another." What is it that matters when all else, including life itself, is said and done? What is the most compelling, the most powerful, the most enduring force in all of the cosmos? What, as we prepare both for living and dying, becomes the echoing refrain? Love-agape love, the unconditional and self-sacrificing love that he himself exemplifies.

Albert Einstein's daughter recently shared a letter from her father in which he said that the real spiritual energy of the universe is not calculated $E=MC^2$. Her father's final equation to humanity is $E=LOVE$. And so it flows, spilling over into the universe, a force that builds, that renews, and re-envisioned what it means to be human.

How does one measure such love? "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends," Of all the last words that Jesus might have said, he chooses love and relationship, even as he chooses us in love and sends us into the world to be love. Not a feeling or inclination, but a choice- to love others as God has chosen to love us.

And it doesn't have to be big bold and spectacular. In fact most often it is not the grand gestures of love but the daily, even mundane laying down of one's life that really matters. I was walking to the hospital in Victoria one morning this week, and the sun was shining, and I looked up and noticed that someone had painted a telephone pole along the street. Actually they had painted 3 in a row, with flowers and humming birds and these poles were funky and cheery and beautiful. And painted on the first one are these words: "Do small things with great love." Mother Theresa. Lay down your life in love, one small bit at a time.

Major Sullivan Ballew was killed seven days after he wrote that letter, at the 1st battle of Bull Run. "When my last breath escapes, it will whisper your name, Sarah." These last words resonated in her ears, and the last words that resonate in our ears and hearts are these parting words of unconditional love. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Love each other."

So it is that I believe that no matter how far you may wander, that if you pause to listen carefully enough, you will hear a message that is both a blessing and a commissioning, both a gift and a calling: "Listen to me, Child. I love you. And now your only job is to share that love." The first, and the last, word is love. Amen.