

# North Kildonan United Church

21<sup>st</sup> February 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## “In Heaven’s Eyes”

Genesis 9: 8-17

Psalms 25: 1-10

Mark 1: 9-15

*Great Friend, if there is anything in our ways in need of change, find some way to let us know. Amen.*

That prayer came from a book entitled Lenten Prayers for Busy People by William J O’Malley, an American Jesuit priest, theatre director, actor and teacher. He has published over 30 books and 100 articles on spirituality and Christian living. Last year our study group used his excellent book on parables. His one secular claim to fame is that he played the role of Father Dyer in *The Exorcist*, a movie I am in no hurry to see again. His work is honest and refreshing and draws on a deep and profound belief in the nearness of God in our daily living.

Hear his rephrasing of the gospel passage we just heard. Because Mark’s account is so barebones, Father O’Malley has included Matthew’s text as well, in order to flesh it out a bit.

“When Jesus stumbled up the banks of Jordan where John had baptized him, the terrifying voice still thundering in his soul, *‘You are my Son! You are the One!’* the Spirit hurled him into the wilderness for forty days and nights, to have his vocation tested. *‘Ha, Ha! If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread, and they’ll flock to you like sheep. No one can resist bread! Fling yourself from the Temple top. They can’t resist a miracle. That’s all they want from you! Take on the power of Caesar, and coerce them to goodness!’* And when Evil left him, rejected, angels ministered to him. When John was arrested, Jesus came forth up north in Galilee, proclaiming the New Covenant: *‘The time of fulfillment is now! The new Kingdom of God is at your fingertips! Change your lives-your whole way of looking at what’s important! I’ve brought good news!’*”

*“Change your lives-your whole way of looking at what’s important! I’ve brought good news!”* This is how Father O’Malley reworded the New Revised Version of Mark’s text:

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”*

Repentance is a strong theme during the season of Lent, and as we see in Mark, repentance is essential to embracing the good news of the gospel. But I think we may mistake repentance with just feeling bad about ourselves and we never really move beyond that. And in doing so, we deny our very humanity as we are busy putting ourselves down.

When I was in elementary school, the teacher had a series of quotes on sheets of paper lined above the blackboard. The one that has always stayed with me is a Chinese

proverb. *"The glory is not in never falling but in rising everytime you fall."* New beginnings. Rising every time you fall.

I've often thought of that. We are so tempted to present ourselves to others as flawless, perfect, never a hair out of place, never a misspoken word. But perfect people don't need Jesus, don't need forgiveness, don't need to forgive others. Perfect people don't fall, don't show weakness, don't need help. Perfect people don't make mistakes and when mistakes are made they are someone else's fault. Perfect people are never wrong, at least in their minds. But presenting ourselves as perfect costs so much. It takes so much energy to maintain an unreal façade of perfection. And then every so often we are reminded of how imperfect, how human we really are.

The other extreme, the opposite of the perfect and arrogant person, is to be tempted to embrace a false sense of humility.

Do you know what I mean? That *"woe is me, I am not worthy"* form of humility. That sense of never quite measuring up, of never quite being good enough or smart enough or whatever deficiency we imagine ourselves to be hindered by. Those self-imposed limitations we place on ourselves that are based more on fear than fact. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 1940s addressed that form of humility this way, and I think it's a brilliant insight. *"Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all. . . . The humility which consists in being a great deal occupied about yourself, and saying you are of little worth, is not Christian humility. It is one form of self-occupation and a very poor and futile one at that."*

Our current life of coping with COVID has placed all of us in our own pressure cookers of stress and frustration and fear. Those living alone have felt that aloneness quite intensely and quite painfully at times. As well, those living with others have known at times great frustration in co-habiting 24 hours a day with someone who, pre-pandemic, was often away at work or other commitments. Too much of a good thing is not always good.

Recently I saw this in a church bulletin: *"Because of the immense pressure this past year has placed on individuals in all manner of circumstances, COVID is identified in some circles as a magnifier. That is, our defences are down and increasingly over time we may not have always been our best selves. Or, perhaps, this time of isolation has allowed us the time to uncover long standing issues regarding forgiveness, or other patterns of behaviour that (with God's help) we wish to address, confess, and resolve."* Does that speak to you? It certainly does to me. I know that I have often not been my best self, not been as loving and forgiving as I know I am capable of doing and being.

*"Change your lives-your whole way of looking at what's important! I've brought good news!"*

Turn away from judgement of others and loathing of ourselves. Abandon the false illusion of perfection and be the flawed, imperfect yet loved person God created you to be, the person Christ died to save. See what's truly important, and forgive, and begin again. Realize that you don't need to be perfect or faultless for God to love you. Embrace that good news.

Father O'Malley has a poem that speaks of God's love and compassion for all of us.

*"A fervent prayer rose up to heaven,  
A fragile soul was losing ground  
Sorting through this earthly babble,  
Heaven heard the sound.  
It was a life of no distinction,  
No successes, only tries.  
Yet gazing down on this unlovely one,  
There was love in Heaven's eyes.*

*In Heaven's Eyes, there are no losers,  
In Heaven's Eyes, no hopeless cause.  
Only people like you, with feelings like me  
And we're amazed at the grace we can find  
In Heaven's Eyes.*

*The orphaned child, the wayward father,  
The homeless traveller in the rain  
When life goes by and no one bothers,  
Heaven feels the pain.  
Looking down, God sees each heartache,  
Knows each sorrow, hears each cry,  
And looking up, we'll see compassion's  
Fire ablaze in Heaven's Eyes."*

Currently we are living in a time when it seems that forgiveness is in short supply. There is no room for repentance for those whom the social media have denounced as modern-day sinners, there is no hope of restoration in the court of public opinion, no chance of reconciliation between the accused and the accuser. An allegation, untested or unfounded, an accident or action not intended, turns into a modern day witch hunt and careers are destroyed and lives damaged. And yet, those who make the allegations are treated, and present themselves, as totally blameless and perfect, and are often cloaked in the protection of anonymity. And if the allegation proves to be groundless, the damage is still done and yet another person suffers.

More than ever we need a spirit of forgiveness and new beginnings within our society and our world. We may not be able to change the world, but we can begin with

ourselves, our openness to God's grace and love, our willingness to truly see what is important in life.

Lent is a time to draw closer to God, to pray for forgiveness and to embrace the great truth that God forgives us even before we seek forgiveness. It is to see ourselves as cherished children of God, born in the likeness of God, redeemed by the Cross of Christ, guided and nurtured by the Holy Spirit. Or to put it in the immortal words of a bit of graffiti: *'God made me and he doesn't make junk'*. Charles Wesley would have us confidently sing:

*Finish, then, thy new creation;  
Pure and spotless let us be;  
Let us see thy great salvation,  
Perfectly restored in thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love and praise.*

They were saying on the radio that second hand stores were having problems with inventory, because so many people had used the lockdowns since last March to clear away the clutter in their homes and now they have little to give away. This season of Lent is a time for each of us to clear away from within us all that blocks our love of God and love of our neighbour. It is a time of self-examination, a time to repent of our past misdeeds and mistakes, to seek forgiveness and to forgive those who have sinned against us, to let it all go and start afresh. How did Father O'Malley put it: *"Change your lives-your whole way of looking at what's important"*.

In his Lenten book, Father O'Malley offers this prayer for use each day. In it are a few petitions where the reader can add their own input. As you will hear, he really does take seriously the understanding of God as our friend, our companion, our guide. Perhaps this prayer could be your prayer throughout these Lenten days.

*"God, my Friend,  
I offer You each moment of this day;  
Whatever comes-the unexpected challenges,  
Diversions from my plans,  
The need-filled glance,  
The expectations and complaints,  
The being taken for granted,  
The slights and slights-of-hand.*

*I'd be grateful if You could keep me aware of my pesky habits, like (list your own)  
And, between us, perhaps we can enliven the spirits of those I live and work with, like  
(once again, list who you are thinking of).  
Whatever else befalls, I trust we can cope with it, together. Amen."*