

North Kildonan United Church

22nd August 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Lord, to Whom Can We Go?”

Psalm 84

John 6: 55-69

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

This summer, like many past summers, part of my holidays included a good long road trip. And like many past summer trips, this journey had its share of challenges or at least the potential for serious challenges. The seemingly unstoppable forest fires in Ontario were giving me considerable pause for thought, as I wondered what I might encounter on my way east, what delays or dangers could be waiting for me.

Fortunately, my fears were groundless, and it was only in the area of Kenora, on my way home, that I encountered significant smoky conditions. But even with that, there was no indication at all that the fires were anywhere near the highway. A great relief!

So it was that in mid-July I headed east, the GPS loaded with my destinations and good old fashioned maps ready as backup. The first stop was Kenora, where many of my family were gathered on Coney Island for a birthday celebration. Nothing breaks the Covid gloom like being in person with those whom you love but haven't seen for a long, long time. Such as my great nephew and niece. The last time I was with them was Christmas 2019. They certainly have grown since then!

Coney Island really is an oasis of calm and recreation. It's large enough to provide a home for deer, one of which I saw, and for bears, which I didn't see, but heard the neighbouring dogs barking their bear warning in the middle of the night.

After several pleasant days of cottage life, my journey continued on to my brother's home in Gatineau, Quebec. Once again I took the northern TransCanada route, Highway 17, which goes through communities like Hearst, Kapuskasing, and Cochrane. I'm not sure it's the road less travelled, though one section, from Long Lac to Hearst, has signs which advise drivers that there are no services for 211 kms, which means no gas stations and hardly any washrooms. That can make for a long and uncomfortable journey indeed.

At a few points along the way, depending upon whether you were travelling north or south, there were large government signs which stated: "From here all streams flow north into the Arctic Ocean" and it was titled "Arctic Watershed." The other side read "From here all streams flow south into the Atlantic Ocean" and it was titled "Atlantic Watershed".

But there is more to these signs than we might realize. An article in *Elliot Lake Today*, found on the internet, says this, in part:

"A "height of land" is a region of high ground that may act as a watershed boundary. Heights of land were important in the historic fur trade for their influence on the determination of routes and portages and they have affected many transportation routes since then. Drainage boundaries were important to Indigenous peoples in defining territoriality, as they were later to European colonists.

It is a line that traverses Northern Ontario. The height of land line follows an irregular course of some 2,250 kilometres across Ontario, ranging from 32 to 280km north of Lakes Huron and Superior.

The Laurentian Divide or Northern Divide is a continental divide in North America dividing the direction of water flow in eastern and southern Canada and the northern Midwestern United States. Water north of the height of land flows by rivers to Hudson and James Bays or directly to the Arctic. Water south of the divide makes its way to the Atlantic Ocean by a variety of streams, including the Great Lakes and Saint Lawrence River to the east, and the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico to the south."

A bit further on in the article we read this, which is significant in these days of land claims.

"This oscillating line then is very important to Canadian history. In 1986, Nipissing University (then college) Professor Robert J. Surtees, of North Bay, in a Treaty Research Report for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada wrote, ". . . in 1791 the boundaries of Upper Canada were set and the new colony received jurisdiction over the territory west of the Ottawa River between the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes waterway and the lands that had been granted to the Hudson Bay Company. Therefore, the Upper Canadian boundary was demarcated by the height of land . . . This is significant for it meant that virtually the entire province was within Indian land as defined by the Royal Proclamation of Oct. 7, 1763 which decreed therein were reserved "for the Use of the . . . Indians as their Hunting Grounds (sic)." In essence, further land purchases and treaties were developed to alienate Indian title to the land."

Sometimes a sign is more than just an indication of a curiosity.

After a night in a motel in Kapuskasing I continued on to my brother's place, where I enjoyed another smaller family reunion and several days of not having to drive for hours on the highway.

But the time came to go back on the road and two days later I was home, having seen only one black bear cub crossing the highway and no other wildlife. You know it was a good long distance drive when you can describe the journey as uneventful. Uneventful and I'm so glad that I didn't cancel my plans for fear of possible forest fires.

After many years of making these long distance drives, I have learned to travel as much as possible in daylight and to have both maps and the GPS system at hand. With daylight your vision is so much better and the road doesn't hold the same terrors of wandering wildlife darting out in front of the car.

Knowing where you are going and being able to clearly see your journey makes all the difference.

In our gospel reading, the disciples are having problems with the depth of Jesus's teachings: *"This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"* And some found that his teaching was too hard, too difficult, and they drifted away, abandoning the adventure, turning off the road which was the way to life in all its fullness. *"Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."* In later years, did they wonder what they had missed? Perhaps some of those disciples later found their way back into the fold, as the infant church began to grow. We don't know, we can only guess, only imagine, what it was like to have that experience of being with Jesus, for however long they stayed with him, of feeling their hearts burn within them as he taught in a way they had never experienced before. There was so much about this man that drew them to him, but then some of his ways, some of his teachings were just too much, too challenging, too costly and demanding, and the safety of home and family and career drew them back. But the wondering, the dreaming of what if they had stayed with Jesus, did that fade with time or was it always a part of who they had become?

So those disciples left. Jesus then puts the question to the Twelve, to the ones, all except Judas, who will become the foundation of the church: *"Do you also wish to go away?"* Simon Peter answered him, *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

To whom can we go as we navigate our journey through life? In this age of "spiritual but not religious" there are so many options, so many philosophies, so many promises and schemes and plans to a happier, fitter, wealthier life. To whom can we go to find true life? To find eternal life?

We have found true life in Jesus Christ. We still have to make our own individual journeys through life, with all its joys and challenges, opportunities and disappointments, but in Jesus and his teachings, in the company of our friends in the faith, we are always travelling in daylight and we are not travelling alone. And that makes all the difference.

The Gospel is not about success, wealth and some sort of guarantee of a pain free, stress free life. Rather, the Gospel is about risking for the sake of others, speaking out when it isn't safe or popular to do so, supporting others in their struggles and sharing our resources with those in need.

Looking back over the years, it was often the church who, before society caught on, decided that our language should include both males and females. Not always a popular stand, yet by using gender neutral terms the message was clear-all are welcome in the family of God, all have a place in the church of God, all are free to serve the people of God in ministry. So we modified our prayers, used inclusive language in our hymns, broadened our images to speak of God, revised the Manual and other guidebooks, all to reflect the new reality which clearly states that *person*, not *man*,

means both genders, and that you prove what you believe by what you say, by the language you choose.

Similarly, and with many common threads, our decision in 1988 that sexual orientation is not a barrier to ministry and the clear welcome extended to the gay and lesbian community was well before society's acceptance. I know many of our people had great struggles and misgivings about this decision, some felt they could no longer be United, others took time away and eventually came back. The 1988 decision was indeed costly in terms of the loss of members and financial resources, although interestingly there were many who were attracted to the United Church because of our openness and acceptance, exiles from their own faith traditions or no faith tradition at all who found a welcoming home with us.

We made this decision not because we are nice people, but because in baptism we are welcomed into the family of God as a child of God, made in God's image and cherished by the One who formed us. Orientation is not a barrier to receiving the gift of Baptism, at least not in the United Church and Baptism opens the door to all aspects of life and ministry in the church. If God has welcomed you in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, how could the church then reject you for ministry. That was how the decision was made.

Some of the disciples in Jesus's day chose to no longer follow Jesus and his way. Jesus asked those who remained if they too wished to go away?' Quite rightly, amazingly and honestly, Simon Peter answered him, *'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'*

His answer is indeed our answer. *'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'* May God bless us all in our life of discipleship. Amen.