

North Kildonan United Church

12th September 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Mark 8: 27-38

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

Every family has its own store house of stories and, at times, legends. As those stories are told and retold, they sometimes evolve away from the firm and actual facts and become more interesting tales of previous times. As I have discovered, two siblings easily have quite different memories of events in our family history.

So for instance we might have accounts of how our parents met, which may or may not be completely true. One of my uncles, for instance, met his future bride while they were both riding the Sargent Avenue bus in the 1950s. As I remember hearing the story of my parents, my dad spotted my mom sitting on the front steps of her family home and somehow their eight year courtship began. The somehow was never disclosed!

Dating nowadays is a completely different enterprise from those days of meeting your match at a local dance or chatting up the clerk at the grocery store, and perhaps that discussion of modern day courtship is best held for another time.

But let's return to family stories. Sometimes powerful truths about the family are revealed at the time of a death. One incident in particular stands out in my memory.

I was conducting the funeral for a member of my congregation who had be born and raised on a farm in Holland. She and her family lived through the German occupation during the war, with all the terrors that involved. Terrors that she did not, or perhaps could not, share with her children.

At the funeral, the story was told of the time during the war when her family sheltered two wounded Canadian pilots. The men were hidden in a secret cellar under the kitchen, and access to the cellar was made by moving the cook stove. Many times German soldiers searched that house for the men, because they knew Allied pilots were in the area, but the airmen were never discovered. A local doctor tended to their wounds and the Dutch underground eventually spirited these two Canadians out of Holland.

At the funeral, this was the first time her children had heard the story, a story that must have had a profound impact on their mother's life. At any moment those two Canadians might have been discovered and their discovery could easily have led to the deaths of the entire family. Perhaps it was a story too vivid and painful to share with her family.

I can understand that. Throughout her life, my mother could never talk about her older sister, aged 17, who died after a brief illness in the depths of the 1930s. A story that remained basically untold, yet it profoundly affected my mother.

Of course many family stories are happy or funny and often convey important truths. One such story is how my father stopped smoking.

Like so many of his generation, dad began smoking as a teenager and maintained that habit through the years. For much of his smoking career, there were no warnings about the dangers involved. Ads showed doctors recommending the cool menthol effects of particular cigarettes, and everywhere you went people were smoking. When I was young, I well remember going to some gatherings of dad's side of the family and the air in the room would be blue with smoke. I don't know how my non-smoking mother put up with it.

The story goes that one day, after dad had been smoking for about 35 years or so, he went into a local corner store for a pack of cigarettes. The shopkeeper asked what brand my dad wanted. Apparently dad said he didn't know what he wanted. Wisely, the shopkeeper told my dad that if he didn't know what brand he wanted, it was time to stop smoking. Which, surprisingly, dad did. I guess I was about two years old at the time and I never saw my father smoke. Of course, like so many, the damage was already done and dad died of heart disease 15 years later.

My oldest brother had the smoking habit as well, and it took a serious bout of pneumonia to make him change his ways and abandon the demon weed.

Back in the mid-twentieth century, in those transition years from smoking makes you popular and is good for your nerves, to the realization that smoking will turn you into a social pariah and kill you, there was a lot of science against tobacco use competing with conspiracy in favour of continued smoking. Tobacco companies had a tremendous amount to lose if more people like my dad quit smoking. And those companies worked hard to discredit the anti-smoking research and the clear connection between tobacco use and disease. Advertising promoted smoking as safe and pleasurable, even though by the 1950s we knew that heart disease, the leading cause of death, was caused by cigarette smoking. And I remember flying in planes with ashtrays built into the armrests. I can't imagine how horrible it was to have smoking in such a contained space!

Five years after my father died, his first grandson was born. Did those three and half decades of daily smoking end his life at age 63? Quite likely.

The parallels between tobacco and COVID as amazingly strong.

So much was unknown in those first days and months of the pandemic. Many factors were at play, the seriousness of the virus was underestimated, politics muddied the decisions made concerning public health, research information was not always shared, and fear, fear and isolation dominated.

In those early days we knew some things but not everything. It's different now. We know that vaccines work, and that they work amazingly well, especially when

combined with masks, social distancing and careful handwashing. To compare it to smoking, getting the two vaccines is like quitting smoking today and never picking up another cigarette ever again.

So why do some resist any attempt to limit the spread of this virus, and in doing so, putting at serious risk those around them? Why do some promote conspiracy theories or encourage the use of dangerous, totally untested, so called cures that are very likely to make the user terribly sick or dead? Of course, with all that we now know about the disease causing powers of tobacco, we might ask why people continue to smoke cigarettes and cigars and pipes, but I digress.

For our focus this day, why are some Christians willingly endangering their own lives and those around them by refusing to follow any precautions and rejecting the available vaccines? And why are they so militant about rejecting the science and the facts which support the vaccines?

I don't know or understand their convictions, nor am I aware of the teachings of their leadership.

But I do know this. When asked, Jesus said that the two great commandments are to love God with everything we have and everything we are and to love our neighbours as ourselves. I believe we fulfill that second commandment whenever we do those things which do not endanger others. Wearing a mask helps keep what possible virus we have from infecting others. Having both vaccines keeps our immunity to the virus high, which means if we are infected, chances are that we will not need to be hospitalized. And every time we don't need to be in a hospital bed, we free up a bed for a neighbour, a stranger, perhaps another family member, who needs that bed and whose life might be saved by access to that hospital bed.

Love God and love your neighbour by not encouraging the virus to spread through lack of vaccination. Love God and love your neighbour by reducing the demands on an overtaxed healthcare system by doing all we can to be healthy. Love God and love your neighbour by not using the term "freedom" as a cover for selfishness, for self-centred, short-sighted actions. Remember that the opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is just not caring, just plain not giving a damn, and it seems to me that those Christians indifferent to the health concerns of others, indifferent to the safety and wellbeing of children and teens and adults of all ages, are rejecting Christ's call to love their neighbour by their selfish, self-satisfied, dangerous actions.

It's not the first time the followers of Jesus have got things wrong, and I'm in no way saying we have everything right!

In today's gospel, Jesus is explaining to the disciples how the future will unfold for him, how in the days ahead Jesus will face great trials, be put to death and will rise again.

Like countless followers of Jesus since then, Peter gets it all wrong and tries to talk Jesus out of such a drastic outcome. Who knows what rationale Peter blurted out

in his attempt to soften, weaken the mission of Jesus. As one commentator has Peter say: "Oh no, we don't want a convicted criminal, a societal failure, for our leader. We'll never succeed if you do that." To which Jesus replies, in effect: "If you want to play human games of power, success and triumphalism, then you're demonically inspired. If anyone wants to follow me, then deny yourself and take up your cross. You must be willing to lose your life in this world."

We often get caught up with the literalism of losing our life. William O'Malley, our Jesuit author of our Parables study a year ago, offers this and I think he's on to something. Here first is the text: *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?*

He writes: "This translation says "life"; the Greek however is *psyche*, "soul", the self, the inner core of everything an individual is. To enter the reign of God, one must put "self" aside-the one reality most of us are most concerned with. Paradox is constant in the gospel: God's ways and expectations are most often quite the opposite of our own. Here is the central focus of the "turnabout" good news: You are not the focus of reality; God is. Once you submit to that truth, everything else will fall into place. By "lose their life" Jesus does not mean exclusively martyrs. He means all men and women who genuinely set others' needs before their own. This, of course, is in direct contrast to Peter's idea-and quite likely our own-of how things "should be". Jesus can bestow sight on the literally blind, but not insight into Peter."

Again, in reference to "forfeit their life", he says: "life" is really "their soul", the essence of who the individual is. Jesus is saying that if one does not stop staring into the mirror-whether at one's beauty or one's shortcomings-he or she will be blinded to the whole purpose of life. His or her life will be, ultimately, meaningless." Words certainly worth pondering.

Let's end with these words by Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the truly great theologians of the 20th century. He has some important things to say to us in these uncertain times.

*"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;
therefore we must be saved by hope.*

*Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate
context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.*

*Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;
therefore we must be saved by love.*

*No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is
from our standpoint.*

Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."

Amen.