

# North Kildonan United Church

19<sup>th</sup> September 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

*Psalm 1*

*Mark 9: 30-37*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

*“Then they came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.”*

Back in my days of preparation for ministry, close to forty years ago if anyone is counting, the lectionary was a fairly new innovation in our worship. Back in the day, I remember talking with one of our Winnipeg ministers who was very excited because a Common lectionary was available, and he was keen on its use.

Quite simply, a lectionary is a table of lessons suggested for use for each Sunday of the year. The Book of Common Order, the first service book for ministers after Church Union, contained a Table of Lessons set in a one-year cycle. That book, published in 1930, was revised in 1950 and from what I understand, it was a book most ministers possessed but rarely ever used.

The 1969 Service Book for Ministers fared much better and it contained a three-year Table of Lessons, which interestingly enough began on the Sunday after Labour Day. That day was called the First Sunday in Creation, which ran through until the Fourth Sunday before Christmas, which we know as the First Sunday of Advent. It was very much a Protestant Reformed understanding of the church year and the place of scripture in worship.

The guiding principle as stated in the Service Book was this, in part: *"The year begins, as it effectively does in most congregations, on the Sunday after Labour Day. It reaches a climax in June, when most people are still worshipping in their home churches."* Or, in other words, before everyone takes off to the cottage!

By the 1960s times were changing and the ecumenical movement was encouraging denominations to talk together, plan together and work together. For Roman Catholics, the reforms of Vatican II transformed their worship, their biblical scholarship and their acceptance of non-Roman Catholics. There was excitement as denominations undertook joint ventures and projects, as high level committees were formed to explore the common threads of the various Christian traditions. One of those common threads was of course Scripture. There was a strong sense that the Holy Spirit was at work in the churches as old divisions and suspicions fell away and a broader approach to the essentials of the faith was embraced.

One of the most profound examples of that embrace was the use of an ecumenical lectionary. That's why the minister I mentioned a few minutes ago was so excited about the lectionary. He was aware that when his congregation read the lessons suggested for a particular Sunday, chances are that the Lutherans across the street and the Roman Catholics two blocks over and the Anglicans downtown were also reading the same lessons. The preaching would vary, as it does from one United Church to another, but the Word would be heard in how many houses of worship each Sunday!

Like all worthwhile ventures, there were costs involved in a careful use of the lectionary. When I was a student in Granby, Quebec, back in the early days of the Common Lectionary, my supervisor taught me that we must have strong and serious reasons to **not** use the suggested lessons for the day, and that it was perilous to abandon those readings for something easier. He felt, quite rightly, that the lectionary was inspired by the Spirit of God and that the discipline of reading and pondering and struggling with the lessons was a very worthwhile exercise and of great benefit to the people being preached to.

But to be honest, the cost of that wholehearted lectionary embracing comes when the preacher just can't find any word to proclaim from the lessons offered, when the resulting sermon maybe as painful to preach as to listen to, and when a substituting of a familiar and helpful text is very tempting indeed. But then, some of the best sermons come from wrestling with unfamiliar or difficult scriptures.

Horace Allen, in his introduction to a lectionary resource I use, talked about what happened when denominations moved towards a shared table of lessons. He says:

*"These ecumenical developments provide preaching with a completely new context. No longer will it be possible or acceptable to abandon the sermon on "Communion Sunday" for a modest non-exegetical "Communion meditation." Nor will an impromptu assemblage of topical, pastoral, congregational or devotional reflections suffice as an exegetical homily on the lessons of the day."*

Basically, responsible preaching must engage the word and resist the urge to be entertaining or consist of bits pulled together at the last moment.

So, this is a long, roundabout introduction to what I intended to say.

In our gospel we find Jesus teaching his disciples about what lies ahead for him, how he will be betrayed and killed and then rise from the dead three days later. Serious stuff, heavy and powerful. One might hope that the disciples would be terribly moved by these words, by the foretelling of the pain ahead for their teacher, culminating in his death. A pain replaced by joy with the hope of Christ's resurrection. No such luck. What does Mark tell us: *But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.*

This is bad enough but then it gets worse. *Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who*

*was the greatest.* Sounds like a bunch of teenagers caught gossiping, shrugging their shoulders when asked to repeat what they had been saying.

Or think of it this way. Imagine you have shared some really bad news with your closest friend, life threatening news, and instead of taking you seriously by asking helpful questions and offering whatever assistance and support that might be needed and actually listening to your situation, that person is wondering or hoping if you might leave them your china set or if they are really lucky, your car. The disciples don't seem to be much different.

Jesus was continually teaching the disciples about the nature of the kingdom of God, teaching and showing them what Christ's mission and ministry was all about, and, most importantly, how their lives would reflect Christ's teachings. They would be the ones to share the gospel throughout the world, and in doing so they would need to embody the gospel principles Jesus taught them. They would be the incarnation of the good news Jesus offers the whole world.

Instead, they are busy arguing about who will be the greatest next to Jesus, the second in command, the deputy Messiah if you will. Who will merit the most respect on earth and be remembered most favourably by history, and perhaps have the greatest of the mansions in the Father's house. Once again, they miss the point.

I find it an interesting coincidence that this lesson about greatness vs servanthood should fall the day before a national election. Every so often the lectionary has a word to speak to the occasion and perhaps today's gospel is worth keeping in mind at this time.

I have been very intentional about not commenting on the election or on the policies and personalities of the various parties running for, shall we say, greatness. In days gone by, at election time, I would suggest, tongue in cheek, that we might sing the harvest hymn "Praise to God, Immortal Praise" whose third verse reads:

*"all that spring with bounteous hand  
scatters o'er the smiling land,  
all that **liberal** autumn pours  
from its rich o'erflowing stores."  
My life is worth more than to choose that hymn nowadays."*

The language of politicians is servanthood but the drive within them is a quest for power and greatness. It is the way of the world, it has always been thus and will not change, regardless of whoever is elected. That quest for power is fed by having powerful friends, people who are influential and connected to other powerful people.

Years ago, involving a political party I will not disclose but probably fits them all, the prime minister of the day was asked by a minister of something or other if the government was going to support such and such a project, a project that would be very beneficial to a community. Without reviewing the details, the prime minister simply asked how many votes would this project guarantee. The projected number of votes was insufficient to receive government approval and this beneficial plan was cancelled.

Was this the kind of greatness the disciples were seeking?

Jesus shows them, shows us, another way.

*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'*

In Jesus's day, in the societal understanding of the times, a child, though cared for and loved by the family, was the lowest on the list of who to listen to or take seriously. In those male controlled, age dominated structures, adults ran the show and children were to be seen and not heard. Children were of no financial or political or societal use, certainly not to be regarded for their opinions. And yet, Jesus holds up a child as an example that his followers are to be open and caring to all people, not just to those who can be of advantage or who fit in or are useful in some way.

We don't know how fully the disciples understood Jesus and his teachings, including that powerful example of a little child in their midst, yet he did not give up on them or dismiss them as fools. It was after the resurrection, after the Risen Lord's appearances that the disciples finally understood what the gospel was all about, why Jesus came into their lives and how they were to embody the love of Christ for all.

The biblical accounts are not historical records which we read and then forget as we move onto something else more interesting. Nor are they tales invented to amuse bored people sitting around a campfire. As Jesus spoke to his followers in that day, Jesus speaks to us in our day, calling us to love him and to show our love for him by our service to others.

There will be those times when we see ourselves in the biblical story, see ourselves misunderstanding the teachings of Jesus, rejecting parts of the story because it seems too hard or painful or we feel inadequate to the task. Yet Jesus still loves us and forgives us and calls us his friends. And invites us to continue to follow him, for in him is our life and our hope. Amen.