

North Kildonan United Church

10th October 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Matthew 6: 25-33

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. (Psalm 19:14)

A favourite gospel reading for Harvest Thanksgiving is this passage we just heard, in which we are advised to trust in the loving providence of God and to be focussed on the things that really matter in life. Wise advice, helpful counsel, though often we find that we can't just live for the day and not worry about tomorrow. At least I find I can't.

So what does it mean to trust that what we need will be given to us?

When I was a student minister in Granby, Quebec, my supervisor very much believed in tithing, a subject worth touching upon as we begin our annual Stewardship campaign.

My supervisor was married and had a family, and if memory serves me correctly, his wife did not work outside of the home. Which means that he was the sole breadwinner for his family.

But each month, he set aside his tithe, 10 percent of his income, to return to the church as his offering to God. He talked freely with me about that and he said that in all of his years of making that tithe, he and his family never went without. With that reduced cash flow each month, the family carefully budgeted to ensure sufficient funds until the next month's salary.

He said there were times when they were pretty close to the edge, yet somehow the needed funds came through, and he never regretted making that tithe. In his life, in his stewardship of the financial resources he received, he lived out the truth of today's Gospel:

“Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

The key for him, the key for me and for others who tithe, is that you start by setting aside the amount you are going to give as your offering. Whatever amount seems to speak to your heart and to your financial situation. Then, with the balance remaining, the bills are paid, and so on.

If we make our offering based on what is left over after we have bought everything else, well, there might not be too much left to offer. Do we give our first fruits, the top whatever percentage back to God, or do we offer the leftovers after we have bought everything we need and everything we want? Let me leave that with you as you review the stewardship pledge for this coming year.

To shift gears a bit, on this Harvest Thanksgiving, let's spend a bit of time in the book of Joshua. In the 24th chapter we read this:

"Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

In the world of religious artifacts, of plaster saints and plastic saviours, of sayings in needlepoint and angels in various poses, all found in Christian stores throughout North America, it isn't difficult to find these words from Joshua: *"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."*

So, what is this passage from Joshua all about? A year ago we spent a lot of time on the story of the Exodus, of God rescuing the people of Israel through the leading of Moses, of walking through the water to escape the Egyptian army, of wandering forty years in the wilderness, this story is fundamental to understanding God's relationship with his people. Now the people have come to the Promised Land, a land Moses cannot take them into, a land that it falls to Joshua to lead them to.

In this new land, after all the years of wandering, all the years of grumbling and doubting and questioning God, into this new land the second generation of Israelites begin a new life. The first generation were unfaithful-it is the next generation that begins a new life of freedom. And if they are to be truly the people of God, they must renew the covenant with God, they must choose whom they will serve.

Joshua gathers the people together, his final act before his own life ends, and he rehearses the covenant, he reminds the people of their history, a history that goes back to Abraham. Joshua reminds them of the God who has been with them, who freed them, who loves them, who invites them into faithful living. Remember all that God has done for you Joshua tells them. It was not some intriguing foreign deity who rescued you from Egypt, it was not the god of the Amorites who fed you in the wilderness, it was not the old gods of your ancient ancestors that brought you into a land of promise-it is the Lord who you are called to serve, it is the Lord who makes covenant and keeps covenant, who is slow to anger and quick to forgive, who loves with an everlasting love-choose this day who you will follow! For the Lord your God did all this for you, people of Israel.

The story of the Exodus, and other pivotal stories, shaped the people of Israel and these stories continue to shape them to this day. The Psalms, with their shouts of joy and cries of despair, the prophets, the book of Proverbs, all these speak of a God who is in relationship with his people, a God who is not a passive indifferent creator deaf to the cries of his people, but rather is a passionate God intimately involved with creation. A God who feels our pain and knows our sorrow, a God who rejoices in mercy and justice and kindness.

The Old Testament is the story of God's love affair with God's people, a love affair that is meant to be shared and includes of all who dwell on the earth. Israel is to be a light to the nations. The New Testament is the story of God's love affair taken a step further, a love found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is in story, in the shape and sound of a story, that the profound truth of God's love is shared with us. And we know that any good story moves the heart as well as the mind. Story shapes us and reminds us who we are, and to whom we belong.

Think of your own lives and your family's life. What stories have been told over and over again, stories that shape who you are, stories that help determine your values, stories that create the uniqueness which is your own family.

Some family stories are funny and happy, some are painful and hard to speak of. My mother had an older sister who died at age 16, before antibiotics could save her. That story could never, ever, be told by my mother. Even over seventy years later, before she died, the pain was still too strong for my mother. Farm life before and during the dirty thirties was also something she could never talk about, but those experiences of surviving through tough times and painful loss profoundly shaped her, and in turn, through her actions and attitude shaped us as well.

Perhaps it's when we look back and remember what once was, that we discover anew who we are now. Renew your covenant Joshua told the people, reconnect with your roots and recommit yourselves to the One who saved you.

In our own families, we can remember and be grateful for the sacrifices made for us by those who were our parents and grandparents, and if we think of it we might just rediscover how our values and attitudes and approaches to life have been shaped by those who first loved and nurtured us. So as you gather with your family for thanksgiving dinner, if in this troublesome pandemic time you are able to do so, you might want to pause and think for a moment about the memories you will be making at that table, the love and sense of belonging you are sharing, and think too of your own place in the long pageant of your family's history.

Christian people also have their stories. Our Methodist forbearers were great for telling accounts of John and Charles Wesley, mostly John. Since Church Union we have lost much of the piety and history of the Methodists in the United Church, but a trip overseas or even to the United States easily shows how important the Wesleys were in shaping the people called Methodist. The personal touch of John and Charles really made Methodism a denomination of the heart as well as the head. John's direct and effective preaching and his practical advice, combined with Charles's superb hymns, such as *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*, made for a powerful force in evangelism.

On the other side of the union, the life and teachings of John Knox, though having a significant number of Presbyterian churches named after him, including our Knox United, by no means engaged the heart and emotions of the Scots Presbyterians the way John and Charles did for the Methodists.

John summed up his teachings around stewardship this way:

Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.

Of course to take this seriously, it is important that we follow through with all three points! Earn. Save. Give!

Another teaching by John is equally worth taking to heart:

“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”

Stories remind us of who we are, and to whom we belong. The Torah stories of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible shaped and preserved the Jewish people through good times and bad. The stories of Christian saints and teachers shaped followers of Christ down through the centuries. The stories and teachings of John and Charles Wesley shaped and inspired the Methodist family from those early beginnings of the denomination in the 1700s through to our present day. And our own family stories shape and direct and remind us that we are loved and cherished and have a place in this world.

May you have a truly blessed Thanksgiving, and may God, the source of all blessings, continue to give you cause to be grateful.

And, as John Wesley was known to say:

"The best of all is, God is with us!"