

North Kildonan United Church

17th October 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Mark 10: 35-45

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)

The other day I came across an article from the July 24th 2013 edition of the *Christian Century*. It was written by Samuel Wells, the minister of St Martin-in-the-Fields Anglican Church in London, England. It had a bit of an eye-catching title "*What's Really Killing the Church*".

I'm at the stage of life, and of my calling, when I'm starting to retell stories I've told before, without realizing it. Perhaps you are familiar with this phenomenon. It seems fresh to you, whatever the "it" is that you are going to tell, and just as you launch into your story the listener raises an eyebrow and says, yes you told me that yesterday, or a week ago, or twenty minutes ago. Ever had that happen to you?

So, at the risk of retelling something I may have already shared with you at some point, let me offer a bit of this article to you. It's certainly worth hearing again.

Samuel Wells, better known as Sam to his friends and admirers, tells the story of a woman, over 90, who had contacted him because she wanted to return to the church.

In his mind, Sam goes through the possible reasons for this woman's desire to come back to church. A familiar story he thinks, of yet another young person who was bored with church but as they age perhaps it's time to give church a second chance.

So, sure that he knew the answer, Sam asks the woman: "What was it that led you away from the church for 75 years?" He soon discovered a completely different answer from what he was expecting.

She said: "It was when we wanted to get married. We were in love. The rector wouldn't marry us."

The article continues: "Well this sounds intriguing, I thought, and always a soft touch for the romantic twist on a story, I blundered in where angels fear to tread. 'So was there something wrong?' I asked. 'Had your husband been married previously, or were you too young, maybe?'"

"No," she said calmly, and I realize now that she was trying hard not to be patronizing or angry. 'The rector looked at my hand. You see, I worked in a mill. I had an accident when I was 16.' She held up her left hand. The last three fingers were missing. 'The rector said that since I didn't have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he couldn't marry us.'

Sam continues: "The colour drained from my face. I reacted with the gasping half-

laugh one coughs out when one hears something so ridiculous that it has to be funny-but of course it isn't funny at all but deeply, deeply horrifying. It was so absurd that no one could have made it up. It had to be true. Suddenly I felt that 75 years away from the church was pretty lenient. 'May I ask what brings you back to the church now?' I said, feeling I couldn't go on without hearing her answer.

"'God's bigger than the church,' she replied. 'I'll be dead soon. The Lord's Prayer says forgive if you want to be forgiven. So that's what I've decided to do.'"

At the conclusion of the article Sam makes these observations.

"What the Welsh rector said to the young millworker wasn't a misuse of power that was perpetuated by someone living in fear of discovery. It was a ghastly misreading of grace under the veneer of an upholding of natural law. No finger-no marriage.

The rector's decision would be a grotesque historical curiosity if it didn't have such distressing contemporary parallels. We don't call it sin, so it's immune from the process of forgiveness and restoration known as the gospel. And it kills the church more surely than any creeping indifference to the truth claims of the scriptures or any discovery that a pastor turns out to have feet of clay.

What saves the church is a person like the millworker. After 75 years she gives us another chance. I wish I felt more confident we'd seize that chance the second time around." So writes Samuel Wells.

It was Dr. Ernie Johnston, my minister at Crescent Fort Rouge United who once told me that if the church is going to err, it should err on the side of grace. This was in regard to some questions about an upcoming baptism. He felt it better and wiser, and ultimately more caring, if we proceeded with the baptism instead of delaying or denying the request.

Err on the side of grace, put the wedding ring on the right hand, look for fresh ways to offer God's love and welcome. It's what the gospel is all about.

We know this but we don't always practice it.

In our gospel reading we find James and John misunderstanding the gospel Jesus is preaching and living out. They make an outlandish request, even more scandalous when you realize the context.

The lectionary for this day begins at verse 35, but it really should start at verse 32. Hear it now:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

If you were there, what would be going through your mind? Would it be fear of the upcoming violence, or compassion for Jesus, or doubt about this religious trek you have been on for how long?

James and John don't seem to hold any of these concerns. "Give us what we ask for" they say to Jesus. "Let us be big shots in your new kingdom, sitting on either side of you, sharing in your glory". Because for these two, it's all about glory, and in their mind this walk to Jerusalem is a march for glory to make Jesus king. Yes, Jesus might have to die but he'll rise again and we'll come out on top they think. The cross is but an inconvenient step on the way to glory, isn't it?

Once again Jesus has to remind them, patiently but perhaps also gritting his teeth a bit, that the life he is offering them, us, is not about power and prestige. It's about service, humility, not glory.

And it's about sacrifice. When the two asked for seats of glory, Jesus said to them that they didn't know what they were asking for. But we know... because as the story unfolds, we discover that when Jesus sits in glory, the gospel writer Mark is referring to the crucifixion. James and John, thinking they are asking for the best seats in the house, would instead be crucified with their Lord if he had granted their request. But as Jesus reminds them, who will be on either side of him at Calvary has already been decided.

Tom Wright offers an excellent retelling of the last few verses of today's gospel.

"When the other ten disciples heard, they were angry with James and John. Jesus called them to him.

'You know how it is in the pagan nations', he said, 'Think how their so-called rulers act. They lord it over their subjects. The high and mighty ones boss the rest around. But that's not how it's going to be with you. Anyone who wants to be great among you must become your servant. Anyone who wants to be first must be everyone's slave. Don't you see? The son of man didn't come to be waited on. He came to be the servant, to give his life "as a ransom for many." (Mark 10: 41-45).

How willing we are to be servants to one another does tend to vary, so we trust in God's grace and forgiveness as we live out our discipleship. Perhaps it's in our attitudes, as much as our actions, in which we show the truth of the gospel in our lives, a gospel founded in our faith in a crucified and risen Lord, the servant of all who calls his followers to love and serve others.

And to remember that, like the 90 some year-old woman discovered, the church is always the place for second chances and more.

One last Ernie Johnston story. He told me once not to worry if people look at their watches while I was preaching. He said it's when they take them off and hold them to their ear that it's time to wind up the sermon.

So I will. Amen.