North Kildonan United Church

3rd October 2021 *~Rev. Don Johnson*

Mark 10: 2-16

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

"She was such an independent woman, always on the go."

"He was such an independent man, you could never catch him at home."

I have no idea of how many times family members have described their recently deceased mother or father, aunt or uncle or friend, in these terms.

We hold independence as a virtue in our society, and most individuals, myself included, strive to be independent, to not be a burden on others, to try to do what needs to be done by ourselves before we call for help. We see independence as a sign of strength, of still having what is needed to carry on and to cope with life's challenges. Sometimes the quest for independence becomes misguided, especially when people remain in their homes too long, but that, like everything else in life, is a personal decision.

We see the drive for independence in the very young. *"I can do it, let me do it"* is a familiar cry from toddlers who, once they are confident in their skill to do something, want to be able to do it, all by themselves. Of course the dangers of many of their actions remains hidden to them, and encountering those dangers, such as a bad fall ruining a nice bike ride, help in the process of growing up and learning about life.

Clearly independence is something we should strive for, isn't it? A sign of strength and ingenuity, of skill and organizational ability. Isn't that something to work towards and maintain?

But if you think of it, dependence is actually the way of life that makes us happiest. We all depend on, rely upon a vast cast of people to maintain our lifestyles, most of whom we do not know. Our interrelationships in society provide us with food and drink, safety, safe sanitary living, just to name a few things. We might end up in hospital for a short or longer stay, and we discover kindness and care from nurses and doctors and other staff whom we have never met before and quite possibly will never see again, and yet in those moments of need they are like angels of mercy.

I remember an overnight stay in a hospital years ago and how totally dependent I felt on the nurses-and how sensitive I was to their attitude towards me. A smile, or a frown, certainly affected my mood, and even to this day I can think of how very kind one particular nurse was to me, and how her simple act of kindness greatly improved my hospital stay. Not being a seasoned hospital patient it was strange for me to be in

the bed instead of standing beside the bed during a visit, strange but also highly instructive, to actually experience what so many hospital patients live through, day after day. I remember how vulnerable I felt, confined to that bed, and I remember how much better I felt when I was told I could wear my regular clothes instead of pajamas.

During that very short stay in hospital, two undertaker friends, one of whom was the owner of his funeral home and well-known in the city, came up to visit me. As they entered the ward, he spotted the surgeon who was to perform my procedure. With his usual wry sense of humour my undertaker friend said to the surgeon: *"We knew who was doing the operation so we thought there might be some business for us."* The surgeon was not amused.

In families we depend upon each other. The level of dependency varies according to the particular individuals in the family, their willingness to participate in the functioning of the family, and the history of the family. I have a friend, now closer to 90 than 80, divorced many years ago but still on good terms with his former wife, who talks almost every morning on the phone with each of his two daughters. He is an independent, fully functioning man, but also strongly bound to his daughters and their families, dependent on them as they are dependent on him, and all are happier for it.

In marriages and other long term relationships, dependence on one another is essential. We rely on each other to help carry the burden of making a home, of raising children, of caring for others beyond the home. The division of labour is essential to the successful running of a home and the failure of one or both parties to live up to their share of domestic duties certainly makes for tension at best, and at the worst, the end of the relationship. Often those issues can be sorted out, but not always, and sometimes, if the differences cannot be resolved, separation and divorce may by the result. Of course there are many layers to any marriage or partnership.

Back when Unity candles were all the rage at weddings, we used to stress that the couple should not blow out their individual candles after they together lit the central Unity candle. We stressed this because marriage does not take away a person's individuality. Each person brings their skills and abilities and history to a marriage, the total of their experiences up to that point of committing to combine their life with their partner's life. That history is not erased with marriage, or as symbolized by blowing out their candles, that the past is gone.

Marriage brings two people into a profound level of mutual dependency, and part of the pain of divorce is the loss of the support and care of the one who was once their partner. Shared duties are no longer shared, but fall to each person to do on their own. Anyone can get married, but it takes maturity to make a marriage work and last.

When Jesus talked about divorce, a concept common in his time, he was stressing that the two individuals in a marriage are not disposable, that the interdependent living of two people together is not easily separated, and that deep pain occurs when a

marriage ends, a pain often shared by the family and friends of the divorcing couple. In Jesus's day, a husband could divorce his wife for what he perceived to be her bad cooking, for instance. Hardly reason to turn a woman's life upside down.

In our gospel reading, some Pharisees, who always seem to be trying to trip Jesus up on some matter of religious observance and the Jewish law, raise the question of divorce. In those days, marriage was very much a legal agreement, not unlike buying a cow, as William O'Malley says, and divorce was a common occurrence.

But unlike the wisdom of that day, Jesus is elevating marriage to the status of the monogamous union of Adam and Eve. Marriage is profoundly deeper than a mere legal agreement, and many are hurt when a marriage ends. So by advocating for a lifetime union without rushing to divorce for flimsy reasons, Jesus is calling for compassion and care to protect women and any children within the marriage. In his comment on this passage, William O'Malley writes:

"The function of the church is to heal, not to insist that matters go from bad to worse. It would be inconceivable, for instance, that Jesus would have demanded a battered woman and abused children should stay with a deranged husband. On the other hand, it would be a denial of our origin if the church allowed couples to give up a commitment too quickly or simply because it was not exciting or convenient anymore."

The concept of dependency is worth thinking about. The church exists because we depend upon each other to support and care for our church home and our fellow members. We rely on generosity and commitment, and it is together, not independently, that we make decisions about our present practices and our future directions. When we act independently or arbitrarily, without consultation or regard for the opinions of others, then the church suffers.

Jesus used a little child as an example of how all of us are children to our heavenly Father, children reliant on God's grace and goodness. It is with humility, not pride or arrogance, that we approach God, and it is as a loving parent that God reaches out to us.

May we never become so independent that we forget how vitally important God is in our lives, and how dependent and connected we are on the incarnations of God's love, who are, of course, the people in our lives.

Amen.