

North Kildonan United Church

21st November 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

John 18: 33-38a

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)

Awhile back, just before the weather turned from those wonderful bonus fall days we were enjoying to winter just around the corner, I decided I should get some final yard work done. So I set about gathering up the remaining leaves on the yard, then I pulled up the assorted weeds and dead plants in the flower garden.

Generally, I'm not that philosophical when I'm doing yard work. My thoughts are usually more practical, are more towards wondering if I have enough gas in the lawnmower; should I compost the grass instead of bagging it for pickup; or the vitally important question – will the garden produce any peas at all this year? The answer to the last question was no. Better luck next year.

But during this last yard work session, as I pulled the weeds up and hoped I wasn't taking any perennials with the weeds, my mind drifted to the cycle of life and how each season builds upon the season just passed. And how what we do in each season supports or takes away from the success and joy of the time ahead.

I thought for instance of the debris I was cleaning up. I had the choice to leave everything in place, to let the weeds and dead plants decompose into a real mess for next spring, a mess I would need to deal with once the snow was gone. Sure, some of the nutrients of those plants might possibly find their way to enrich the garden soil, but the weed seeds would definitely try to get a good head start as the weather warmed in springtime.

"Pay me now or pay me later" is a concept not restricted to the purchasing of something with smaller payments over time. The interest charged, if you will, in delaying a garden cleanup, is paid by the need to exert much more effort to clean up a wet garden mess in springtime instead of gathering dry plants and leaves in the fall.

So, as I patted myself on the back for my wisdom in tidying the garden, I thought a bit about the cycle of nature and the cycle of life. This season was now over, some plants prospered with the heat and dryness, others didn't do so well. Most of my tomatoes looked like they had been planted just a bit too close to an atomic energy plant, many of them exhibiting odd growths and lumps, misshapen and cracked and just plain woody, as we used to call fruit and vegetables not up to their potential.

Not every plant is destined to turn out perfect, year after year, nor will every garden produce to our expectations. There are so many variables, so many challenges; yet we still dig up the soil, offer it nutrients and water, plant with hopeful expectation,

pray for rain then pray for sunshine, and then we look with joyful anticipation for the harvest, however that harvest turns out.

Once that harvest is gathered in, rich and bountiful or weak and disappointing, we turn our minds to next year. What could we do differently, why were the carrots so tiny or the tomatoes so gnarly or the peas nonstarters? What do we need to remember that worked so well this year, was it the new soil mix used or a different approach to watering and weeding?

The gardener has all winter to think about the garden. Time to check out seed catalogues, research new ideas for planting, sketch out novel approaches to positioning certain plants to give them the best ability to produce to their full potential. Perhaps start some plants from seeds, thus anticipating the joys of springtime as the snow continues to come down.

The cycle of the seasons, the rhythm of the seasons gives us the promise that something new is always on the horizon, that life does not need to be set and fixed in one pattern alone.

So as I pulled up the weeds and the dead plants, my mind drifted to the rhythm of the church year, to the seasons that speak to us of God's plan, to the lessons that, when read Sunday by Sunday, are not random thoughts from centuries gone by but are clearly chosen passages intended to direct us and teach us.

Those dead plants I pulled up were once beautiful flowers. Those weeds were evidence of my lack of attention in caring for the garden. But both reminded me that next year can be different, and that much of that difference is in the choices I make, the care I extend, the love I put into tending the garden. Next year can always be different, every new year, every new season offers that promise.

And while the rhythm of our daily life is very much shaped by the calendar and by the weather, the rhythm of our church life is directed by a different calendar.

Today we gather on what is regarded as the concluding Sunday of the church year. Throughout this church year, the Gospel of Mark has mainly been our guide, sharing with us the teachings and life of Jesus, from Mark's perspective. Some Sundays, like today, the lesson is from John's gospel. Next Sunday the cycle of the church year begins again, with the Gospel of Luke, assisted at times by the Gospel of John, opening us to the life and teachings of Jesus.

This change in season, this transition from the long months of the Sundays after Pentecost into the beginning of Advent, will be vividly portrayed with different banners and decorations, with blue instead of green as the dominant colour, and with readings and hymns and music which speak of a different time in the church calendar.

But we are not there quite yet. This last Sunday of the church year is known as the Reign of Christ Sunday and the gospel reading suggested for this day is the account of the encounter between Jesus and Pilate.

By this point in the gospel, Jesus has been arrested and brought before Pilate. The religious authorities were urging Pilate to execute Jesus, but Pilate is not so convinced that Jesus warrants death. In an attempt to understand who this Jesus is, this seemingly benign carpenter's son, Pilate asks him: *"Are you the King of the Jews?"*

This question begins a fascinating discussion between the two. Pilate is a military man, he thinks like a military man and he understands the world from a military perspective. In his day, kings often gained their power and authority through violence and manipulation. Sometimes the crown passed peacefully from father to son, but not always. And once in power, kings expressed their authority by at times brutal acts of terror.

So when Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, he's basically asking Jesus if Jesus is a threat to Roman authority. Is this carpenter's son about to incite violence and challenge the enforced peace of the Roman occupation? Pilate is a man of violence and he's wondering if this strange Jewish man called Jesus is also a man of violence.

And yet, thinks Pilate, if this Jesus is a leader, a king, he's really not much of a serious threat. His followers have all run away, he has no claims to Jewish royalty, at least no claims Pilate would be aware of, and he stands before Pilate as poor and defenceless. Perhaps this Jesus is just deluded and after a good flogging could be sent away from Jerusalem to live a quiet life tending sheep or working as a carpenter.

Pilate's question is met with a question from Jesus, which then leads into the heart of who this Jesus really is.

Pilate and Jesus are talking about kingdoms, but they are coming from very different perspectives. A kingdom for Pilate is a political entity based on fear and violence, enforced by swords and armies. It is a kingdom of power and oppression. Truth is determined politically, so for a Roman governor like Pilate, truth is determined by whoever is stronger.

The kingdom Jesus speaks of is a very different concept altogether. The kingdom Jesus proclaims is founded in truth, not lies and deceit, it is founded in love and compassion, not violence and murder. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed and lived was unintelligible, irrational to someone like Pilate. We see this so clearly when, in response to Jesus's statement: *"For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."* Pilate replies with *'What is truth?'*

Of course we know that Jesus is the embodiment of truth, that Jesus is truth. Jesus has come to proclaim a new way of living, God's way of living, based on God's truth. The way of life is not based on Pilate's sword and his power to take another person's life. The way of life Jesus offers is seen in his self-giving on the cross, in his dying and rising so that we may die and rise with him.

Yes, Jesus was a king, Jesus is a king, and his kingdom is for the world and is found within each of us. So as followers of Jesus we hold citizenship in two kingdoms, in the world in which we live, and in the kingdom of God, to which we belong. And there will be times, some dramatic, some subtle, where the worldly kingdom of Pilate in which we live will be at odds with the kingdom of God within us, and we will experience a moral dilemma of which way to go.

Do you remember the movie *Chariots of Fire*? Based on a true story, the movie is centred around the 1924 Paris Olympics. In the movie, we see Eric Liddell, one of Great Britain's top runners, a devout Scottish Presbyterian who would later go on to be a missionary in China and was to die there in 1945.

There is one scene in which great pressure was put on Liddell to run a race on a Sunday, thus violating his conviction about keeping the Sabbath holy. Liddell steadfastly held to his refusal to break his Sabbath keeping and eventually other arrangements were made. But the memorable part for me was when a chief representative of the British Olympic committee contemptuously said to Liddell: "*In my day it was King first then God and Country.*"

"What is truth?" Pilate asked. We have found truth and life in Jesus Christ, and our lives are blessed and enriched by his truth.

As we begin a new church year, may we continue to be faithful servants of God's kingdom in the world, sharing the faith, hope and love of Christ in all we do. Amen.