

North Kildonan United Church

23rd January 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Mission Statements”

Psalm 19

I Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

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.

"Goods Satisfactory or Money Refunded". For generations of Canadians, myself included, this motto of the T. Eaton Company, or Eaton's, basically summed up this vast chain of stores that once stretched from one coast to the other.

It's been over two decades since the company declared bankruptcy and was taken over by Sears, who in time also disappeared from the Canadian retail market. All that remains of the former Winnipeg eight storey department store is the bronze statue of Timothy Eaton, with his well-polished toe touched for good luck by countless shoppers, now resting in the concourse of the Canada Life Centre, the toe still touched by sports fans hoping the best for their team.

I knew the store well. Between grades 11 and 12 I found summer work at Eaton's as a part-time freight elevator operator, a job that took me through the rest of high school and university, a job that basically paid for my university education. And my story is the story of how many others who found part-time employment with the company while they pursued further education.

My aunt began in the baby department at Eaton's in 1919 and forty years later, 1959, she retired, only to then come back and work several more years in her retirement. Retired then back to the same job-sounds a bit familiar. Even my mother worked full time at Eaton's for over twenty years.

"Goods Satisfactory or Money Refunded". Timothy Eaton and his wife Margaret opened their first store in Toronto in 1869. Unlike most other shopkeepers, they operated on a cash only, fixed price approach, unlike the bargaining and trading style common to the day. A year later, they instituted the well-known policy of *"Goods Satisfactory or Money Refunded"*.

Timothy Eaton was an Irish Protestant immigrant and strong churchman. He was raised Presbyterian but later became a devoted Methodist. As the Online Encyclopedia of Canadian Christian Leaders writes: *"Eaton was revered for his inflexible integrity. He mandated that in all advertisements "the exact truth should be told with regard to the goods offered for sale." He decreed that if a customer was not satisfied, the price should be refunded. And he remained an unwavering Methodist who never sold tobacco, liquor, or playing cards in his store and did not allow them in his home."*

The story is told of the Sunday morning when Timothy opened his wallet to look for a five-dollar bill for the offering plate. He only had a ten-dollar bill, so apparently he tore it in half and the next Sunday placed the other half on the plate. Actually Timothy was very generous in assisting the establishment of Methodist churches in Toronto.

The above quoted encyclopedia offers this reflection on Timothy's legacy. *"At the funeral service in Eaton's home, the Reverend Joseph Odery mourned the loss of "one of the best friends I ever had," a man who in matters of faith had the "beautiful simplicity of a child" and who endeavoured "to have the Sermon on the Mount wrought out in his daily life."* Dr. Nathanael Burwash, the chancellor of Victoria College, further eulogized Eaton, saying that the *"old-fashioned fear of God and faith in Divine Providence was deep-rooted within him."*

In 1909, Eaton's wife learned that the Methodists were trying to raise money to build the first great Methodist church in the northern section of Toronto. She offered to donate all the money they needed to build one of the handsomest churches in the city and made only one request: that the church be named after her husband. The Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, on Toronto's St. Clair Avenue, was completed in 1914. It testifies to Eaton's steadfast faith."

That church remains a strong and vibrant congregation, and is by far one of the most beautiful and well-equipped United Church in Canada.

"Goods Satisfactory or Money Refunded". It seems only natural that a man of faith and high principles would create such a practice for his business. Actually it is a mission statement for how Eaton's would operate and relate to its customers. And as long as they were in business Eaton's held to this approach. The stories are legendary of how far customers stretched Eaton's return policy.

Mission statements are to be found everywhere. North Kildonan United Church has one. Ours is at the top of every order of service and it reads as follows: *Our Mission...to be an accepting Christian community dedicated to living, sharing and teaching the Word of God.*

We respect all aspects of people including race, ethnicity, gender expression, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, age, religion, mental wellness, and ability.

In essence, our version of *"Goods Satisfactory or Money Refunded"*.

A mission statement is a way to explain, in simple and concise terms, the purpose for being for the organization or operation, basically a summary of what the organization is all about. With the Eaton's statement, it tells the customer that the store will offer the most suitable product available, but if it turns out that the product is not suitable after all, the sale will be reversed, money returned, and there is no risk or loss to the customer.

So, from 1870 when the policy began until the store closed its doors in 1999, there was a clear understanding of what it meant to shop at Eaton's.

The North Kildonan United Church mission statement offers a clear understanding of what our congregation is all about. The creation of this mission statement occurred well before my arrival, so I don't know the ins and outs of how it was created, or what particular issues may have been active at that time. But as we read through it, we understand that our mission, the goals we are aiming to achieve, is to be focussed on being a Christian community centred on the Word of God, a community that accepts and respects, in the words of the old prayer, *"all sorts and conditions of men and women"*. Or in the language of a contemporary hymn, *"All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place."* Goals that are not just achieved and then set aside as done, but goals that we continually strive to bring to life and practice, because there is the possibility that we may not always be at times accepting or welcoming.

Our reading from I Corinthians reminds us that the North Kildonan mission statement did not arise from our cleverness and wisdom, but rather echoes St Paul. Because, after all, the Christian community we strive to build and sustain is the body of Christ, made of diverse parts. In commenting on the Corinthians passage, Raewynne Whiteley in Daily Feast observes:

"One of the strengths of the image of the body is that it provides an opportunity to speak about the place of those who are not normally valued in our society. This text suggests that every single person in the church matters-the housebound elderly, babies, those with disabilities, as well as generous givers and hard workers. This is a reality we can name, which has less to do with equality than with wholeness. Only with all of our members can the body of the church be whole."

Jesus' mission statement, the ultimate mission statement, can be seen in today's gospel. After his extensive time of preparation Jesus was ready to begin his work of salvation for all people. As we heard:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, *'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'*

This is how it all begins, as Jesus, quoting the prophet Isaiah, outlines his mission and ministry, a ministry of good news, hope, freedom and restoration. In the same commentary just quoted, Robert Brearley writes:

“Luke wants us to know how Jesus’ ministry began upon this earth. It began when the Holy Spirit claimed him in baptism, tested him in the wilderness, and filled him with power for an urgent ministry of grace to the downtrodden in this world. The Holy Spirit came and taught Jesus what was real: to say no to the false options and temptations in this world and yes to God’s good purposes for all people; to say no to self-glory in all its forms and yes to helping the poor and the captured of all kinds; to say no to trying to get your God to work for you and yes to working for your God with urgency and compassion.”

And ever since that Sabbath morning in a Nazareth synagogue, when Jesus closed the scroll with these words: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’, ever since, his mission statement has become the mission statement of all of us who wish to follow him. Amen.