

# North Kildonan United Church

14<sup>th</sup> August 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Hebrews 11: 29-12: 2

Luke 12: 49-56

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*Eternal God,  
in the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;  
in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;  
and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.*

For the first time in more than a few years I was able to visit friends in Toronto this summer. The drive was long but mainly uneventful, and with stops overnight in Thunder Bay and Sault Ste Marie and for once I didn't arrive exhausted at my destination. Of course, the GPS could have been a bit more helpful once I arrived in Toronto. It directed me on to an extremely congested Highway 401, then on to a similarly congested Bayview, and it outdid itself when it led me to turn left, without the benefit of traffic lights, from a side street onto Bloor Street, one of Toronto's busiest roads.

But I made it, and for most of my week there the car remained parked and away from the Toronto traffic.

My friend Arn has retired from his career as a meteorologist with Environment Canada and he had time to show me around. Even though I had lived in Toronto for five years, there is so much of that city that I have yet to explore, so everywhere Arn took me was a new adventure.

One afternoon we ended up at Ireland Park. I had never heard of it and Arn advised me that it wasn't your typical city park. On our way there we passed through the Toronto Music Garden, another atypical yet very interesting park, worth exploring another time.

Ireland Park is located on the waterfront of Lake Ontario, near the docks where newcomers to Toronto would arrive, and nowadays close by huge grain elevators. It was opened by the President of Ireland in 2007 and was a joint venture of the people of Ireland, the City of Toronto and the Canada Ireland Foundation.

Ireland Park commemorates the tragedy of the Potato Famine that took a million Irish lives between the 1840s and the 1850s. In 1847, 38,560 Irish women, men and children boarded crowded ships to begin a new life in Toronto. Those ships became breeding grounds for cholera and typhus, and by the time they arrived, 1,186 passengers had died or were soon about to die. Many more were desperately ill. The population of Toronto at that time was around 20,000, and here were over 30,000 newcomers in need of food, water, shelter, and medical care. Many of the medical and religious communities, ministers and lay folk alike, who reached out to help also took ill and died.

So, it's a sad and solemn place. In Ireland, at the place where the ships loaded their passengers for North America there is also a memorial. That commemorates the beginning of those perilous journeys, and Ireland Park remembers their arrival.

The park consists of five statues of immigrants who appear to be in a desperate state. Once you pass those, you encounter a series of tall slabs of Irish limestone, looking like a massive toast rack with slice after slice of bread evenly arranged.

But the real significance of the park lies between those slabs. To date, only 675 names of those 1,186 passengers have been discovered. On the inside of each slab are inscribed those 675 names, names like Ryan and McKnight and Robinson. And an inscription that catches your breath: "A Child from the Wharf". In time, as, and if, more names are discovered, there is room on these slabs of Irish Kilkenny limestone to continue the chronicle.

No nation, no group nor family, are immune to the pain of the past.

It makes me wonder what was in the minds of those refugees from famine and starvation and poverty. Perhaps their thoughts were shaped by hope for a new life, yet so close by them was the tragedy of hardship as those around them took ill. Were they worried about what awaited them in this strange and unknown land, and could they allow themselves some sense of excitement for the new beginning ahead. If anything would test their faith in the providence of God, the transatlantic journey aboard these coffin ships would. And we can only hope that their faith in the loving providence of God kept them strong and sound.

The original recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were also in desperate times. They were Jewish Christians, followers who found the teachings of Jesus profoundly life changing, yet they faced exclusion and rejection from the community around them. Surely it would be simpler to renounce their affection for Christ and return to the Jewish religious community they knew so well.

Have faith they are told in the letter. Hang in there. Remember how God has supported the people in past days and that same God in Christ will continue to support and lead and encourage them onward.

Have faith in the future, remembering of what God has done in the past, the author tells them, telling us at the same time. Think of the rescue God achieved in the Red Sea, when the people walked to safety as on dry land and then the Egyptians were washed away. Think of all the courageous faithful through whom God worked His will.

The names David and Samuel, for instance, and others who are perhaps unknown to us this day, would be familiar reminders of courage and determination and trust in the mercy and grace of God.

And, the author stresses, these are not bygone individuals from a long-ago time. For the author, these saints and martyrs and leaders are near us, with us, cheering us on.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

The example of a race would be very familiar to those first hearers of this letter. They would be so aware of the role of the crowd in encouraging the runners to do their very best, run their fastest, and receive the crown of victory.

But this is a different race we are invited to join, not based on accolades and the cheering of the crowd. The race set before us is a race of perseverance and trust, of remaining faithful to the one who is leading us in our race through life. It is a race that we keep at, regardless of how difficult at times the track might be. A race focussed not on outrunning the others but on keeping our eye firmly fixed on Jesus, the one who has gone before us, the one who leads us through this life and brings us safely into the next.

The image of the cloud of witnesses surrounding us is worth embracing, I believe. It reminds us that we stand, or should I say run, with a long and faithful line of followers of Christ, with those who kept the faith even though they may not have received any of what they had hoped for.

It's a vision for the church that we cannot live without.

I think, for instance, of those occasions when we celebrate Holy Communion. As the prayer is offered, the bread broken and the cup filled, we remember those who once sat at this table with us, those who gave of themselves for the sake of the gospel, for the continuation of our congregations, for the passing of the faith from their generation to the next. Who is to say that our faithful are not with us, in that "*mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.*" Who is to say they are not cheering us on even now, present with Christ in all our worship.

The message of the letter to the Hebrews is simply this. We have faith in the future because of what God has done in the past. And while we are ever so aware of our past, with its achievements, for there were many, and its shame, which we are still working through, we nevertheless look to the future, to the future God invites us into. So we run with perseverance, aware that we are facing challenges that didn't exist a few years ago, wondering about how many people might come back to church after the pandemic, looking with alertness and alarm at budgets and shortfalls. Yes, we do all that, and more, and we worry. But we also trust in the unfolding of the future, of opportunities unimagined, of gifts yet to be received, of God's grace to keep us faithful, running with perseverance the race set before us.

So, we trust in God and remain faithful to the Gospel.

I want to end as I began.

In 1847 the ships arrived with their distressed passengers to the docks of Toronto, and everything looked grim and hopeless for the Irish in Canada. In 1854, just seven years later, with some members of his family, a Northern Irishman of Scottish parentage arrived in Toronto. He was 20 years old, born in Ballymena in 1834. After working with his brother for a period of time, this man and his wife took over a store on Yonge Street in Toronto in 1869 and in so doing revolutionized Canadian merchandising. His name was Timothy Eaton. And the rest, as they say, is history. Amen.