

# North Kildonan United Church

21<sup>st</sup> August 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Psalm 71: 1-6

Luke 13: 10-17

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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.*

Recently a friend of mine was preparing to take his family for a week's stay in a rented cottage. It was in the Whiteshell and was very much his daughter's idea. She paid the rental fee and left the actual arrangements to dad, including how he was going to transport in his RAV4, his two adult daughters, two grandsons, a large dog and himself, to said cottage. Transportation was also required for the food, clothing, toys and other essentials they would require for a week away from grocery stores and fresh water. So that's how I spent a Saturday, with my car loaded, driving 171 kms to that cottage then immediately turning the car around for the trip home. After all, I do work on Sunday mornings.

The evening before, my friend was doing a few errands when suddenly all the lights on his dashboard started flashing. He had an appointment to get the oil changed at the local Midas on the Saturday morning before leaving for the cottage, so he drove there and left the vehicle for the morning.

As it turned out, all the repairs were completed in time for the family to head to their week away, repairs such as a new battery, new alternator, new brakes and so on.

While it was an expensive repair job, clearly needed, I shudder to think what would have happened if the alternator had failed a day later. How disastrous it would have been if the car had broken down on the highway, in the middle of the wilds of Manitoba.

There are areas on the way to the Whiteshell that have no cell service, long stretches before you encounter a community, let alone a garage and a towing service open on a Saturday.

What a difference a day sometimes makes. I reminded my friend how close he came to disaster, a fact he acknowledged.

There was a time when we might describe this escape from potential danger as serendipity. And serendipity is defined as *the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way*. So, some might see the failure of the alternator at the right time as a serendipitous event, others as providence or karma or something else altogether different. I'm just glad things worked out as they did.

But still, there are those times when things happen that make you scratch your head and wonder and hopefully smile.

The last wedding I conducted in Toronto was on a Saturday after a great storm. The local transformer was knocked out, cutting electricity to the church.

The couple getting married were offered two options. We could hold the ceremony in the parlour, a spacious room with lots of windows, natural light and a piano. Or we could wait until the power was restored, but we had no idea how long that might take.

Neither option appealed to the couple, so they sent a friend of theirs to buy up as many candles as possible, which were then placed wherever there was a flat surface. The organist, who had to use the piano instead, was surrounded by candlelight in a display that would have impressed Liberace.

The location of the wedding was of course the sanctuary, a beautiful space filled with stained glass windows. There is only so much light candles can provide so I struggled with reading the wedding service. Fortunately it was an order that I knew so I basically ran on memory.

Either by accident or design, I'm not sure which, all the light switches had been turned on before the service began. So, in the romantic glow of a vast array of candles, the wedding began. Once the bridal party was in place, I strained to read the somewhat lengthy introduction, a passage I did not know by memory. I then asked them if there was any reason why they shouldn't be married, and this question was followed by the question to the bride if she would take this man to be her husband. Before she could say "I will", the power returned and the sanctuary was filled with light. The timing could not have been more perfect if we had planned it. Most of the candles were extinguished, the organist returned to the now functioning organ and the service continued without a hitch.

Another example of serendipity? Luck, coincidence, chance, the Spirit at work in the world? You decide. However it happened, it was a happy occasion that really doesn't require too much analysis from us.

Our gospel reading on one level provides a third example of what we might describe as serendipity.

Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. He catches a glimpse of a woman who for the last eighteen years has been bent over, unable to stand straight. Moved by compassion, Jesus heals her, and for the first time in eighteen years she is able to stand up straight, her eyes free to meet the eyes of anyone she encounters, at last freed from the constraints of her own body. How elated she must have felt, how grateful and so she bursts out her gratitude by praising God. And if we had been there that Sabbath day, no doubt we too would have given thanks for this gracious miracle of healing.

Not everyone is impressed. The leader of the synagogue denounces this healing as a violation of the Sabbath. This work could have happened the next day or some other time he maintains. The letter of the law is all he could see, forgetting that the Sabbath was given as a gift to the people, a sign of freedom. Was not rescuing a woman

from the imprisonment of her own body an act of freedom, an act of grace? In his rule bound life, he was oblivious to those acts of serendipity that bring us joy and delight and hope. What better day to celebrate God's gift of new life and healing than the Sabbath, but of course this synagogue leader was unable to see God in Jesus, to see and experience the incarnation of God in this humble yet profound teacher, to witness the power of God offered by Jesus to those in need.

But we can't be too harsh with this synagogue leader. Steeped in Jewish teaching and tradition, he knew that part of the prohibition about working on the Sabbath was to remind the people that they are a part of the community God had formed at the Exodus. The Hebrew people had been slaves of Egypt, told when to get up, told when to lay down, told when to work and told when to stop working. Once they were rescued through the waters of the Red Sea and led to a new land by Moses, they were to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest. The Sabbath reminded the people that through the grace of God they were no longer slaves, and that one day of the week was to be just for them, a day of freedom from work and a day of recreation, a day of family and friends, a day to rejoice in being the people God had chosen. Of course the Sabbath echoes the day of rest God took at Creation, the Seventh Day, a Creation which God declared to be very good indeed.

But Sabbath keeping was to go further. If you were an employer, you were to ensure that your workers also have that day of rest once a week, at least. That was true in the time of Jesus and that is true today. And the healing of the woman on the Sabbath can be seen as Jesus honouring the Sabbath tradition of freedom from oppression by rescuing this woman from the oppression of her ailment. And of course, the healing reminds us that God is a God who cares about freedom from oppression, in whatever form it may be found, a God who stands behind those who seek freedom and grace for others.

In his book, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Jacob Neusner writes:

*'Remembering the Sabbath day to keep it holy formed, and now forms, what eternal Israel does together: it is what makes eternal Israel what it is, the people that, like God in creating the world, rest from creation on the Seventh Day. The Sabbath has both positive and negative sides; on that day, we do not do servile work. On that day, we do celebrate creation. For six days we make things; on the seventh, we appreciate them.'*

I want to conclude with a practical presentation of Sabbath keeping from another rabbi. He writes:

*"Thirty-nine work activities are prohibited on the Jewish Sabbath. There is a popular misconception that these restrictions give rise to an onerous, rule-ridden, joyless day. On the contrary, the experience of observant Jews is that these well-defined guidelines make possible, every seven days, the physical and spiritual renewal which modern men and women need."*

*Just visualise the feeling of liberation from the telephone, traffic jams, dislocation and responsibility; imagine having the leisure to be within a few minutes of your home, available to your family, local friends and neighbours...picture the periodic opportunity of carrying on a conversation with an acquaintance or a friend, finishing a story with your child, or just staring into space without feeling that you are guilty of not using your time constructively. People pay a lot of money to go on structured weekends for this very purpose.*

*On the Sabbath we experience time in a new way. This requires us to change social and psychological habits. Taking a bath, making a change of clothes, setting the table decoratively, responding to the schedule of the sunset rather than the timepiece-these are aids to the difficult task of changing spiritual gear.*

*The sages ask: is it possible for a human being to do all his/her work in six days? To which they answer: Rest on the Sabbath **as if** all your work were done. This capacity of shift one's mental and spiritual state from doing to being is the crux of the Sabbath programme.*

May the serendipity of this Sabbath day be yours. Amen.