

# North Kildonan United Church

25<sup>th</sup> September 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

I Timothy 6: 6-19

Luke 16: 19-31

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

As Christian people we have a vast and wonderful treasury of hymns available to us. For instance, we have psalms set to hymn tunes, such as the beautiful arrangement of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm we just sang. Can we imagine ever singing “The Lord’s My Shepherd” to any other melody than that seemingly classic tune Crimond?

Well, we used to use other tunes. It was Jessie Seymour Irvine who wrote the tune Crimond in 1872. But it didn’t automatically accompany the text of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm we just sang. In our first hymnbook of the United Church, the well-loved Blue Hymnary, published in 1930, the lyrics of The Lord’s My Shepherd were set to three other psalm tunes. It took the royal wedding of Princess Elizabeth in 1947 to combine Crimond to the words we just sang, and that pairing of tune and text soon caught on and has remained strong through the years. It was with the Queen in mind that I chose that hymn.

There are many styles and approaches to music in church. One group we might look at today is the Gospel music of the African American spiritual. Think of some of the treasures of that collection. “Swing lo, sweet chariot, coming for to carry you home” or “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.” Gentler spirituals include “I’ve Got Peace Like a River” or the poignant deep emotion of “Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child.”

On a brighter note, how about this one:

“Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,  
Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,  
Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,  
Oh, rock-a-my soul.”

Though not to be found in Voices United or More Voices, it has a place in many churches choral libraries. I well suspect we might have copies of it in our library.

In a previous church, this was a familiar anthem for the choir. I have some memory of a choir practice that ended up spending some considerable time on the pronunciation of one particular word. The debate was over “Boosum” or “Bussum”.

Tomahto, tomato, potato, potahto, boosum or bussum. However you say it, it’s an inspiring spiritual.

Many people are very fond of African American spirituals, and with good reason. The music is highly singable, with a clear strong beat that gets the toes tapping, the hands clapping, the fingers snapping, and the heartrate pulsing. Just like a good Welsh hymn tune, think for instance of “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” sung to the tune Hyfrydol. And just like a good Welsh hymn, the whole body is encouraged to be involved in singing these spirituals. Ever found yourself swaying back and forth when you sang “Love Divine” or “Go Tell it on the Mountain.” There is a passion in the music not always found in standard hymns, a passion that lets the singer get right into spiritual.

This strong, singable, memorable music provides an excellent base for the texts of these hymns. Repetition of lines drives the point home:

*I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river in-a-my soul.*

The texts of these spirituals sing of love, care, compassion, justice, yearning, hope, faith. They are meant to encourage the believer, often a person going through trials and tribulations, many who were slaves or existing in deplorable conditions, meant to encourage hope and perseverance, and above all, trust in the lovingkindness of God.

And the texts of the spirituals were biblical. They drew their inspiration from both the Old and New Testaments, words they could trust in a world that at times was so cruel and mean. And as they sang, their words echoed the words of life they found in the Bible. Their white master was cruel, but their Heavenly Father loved and cared for them, ready to welcome them home when this life was over.

So when they sang spirituals, they remembered the hope they heard in Scripture.

*“Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,  
Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,  
Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,  
Oh, rock-a-my soul.”*

This spiritual is based on today’s gospel. Now you may be thinking that you didn’t hear the word bosom today, and of course you would be right. But the word was there in the King James Version, which was the translation used when these spirituals were composed.

*“And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.”*

The New Revised Standard Version, the translation we regularly use, the translation which has its origins in the Authorized or as we know it King James Version of the Bible, edited bosom out and replaced it with this bland rendering:

*"The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side."*

I'm not sure why bosom disappeared and was replaced with, well with Abraham or by his side. To me, a completely different picture is painted. In the King James Version, Lazarus is embraced and held and comforted by Father Abraham. You can almost hear Abraham quietly assuring Lazarus that his sufferings are over, his misery done, and he is now safe and sound in paradise. He will no longer be hungry or thirsty, dogs will not harass him, nor will passers-by just pass him by as though he was invisible, or worth nothing. Home at last, Lazarus is finally home. The everlasting arms for Lazarus are the arms of Abraham, perhaps gently rocking him as Lazarus comes to realize the hope and promise of paradise.

Somehow the new translation doesn't convey any of that deep emotion. If you will, the text, like many texts, has been censored and cleaned up.

At times we do a lot of censorship in the church. For the sake of textual accuracy, which is important, of course, we remove the poetry and emotion from well-known passages of scripture, and for the sake of inclusivity, which I fully agree with, we nevertheless mangle some texts very badly indeed. As one person put it: "It's amazing that we Christians have managed to make a guy who turned water into wine at a party seem boring."

So what if we had heard the text translated this way...

*"The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be at the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus at his bosom."*

Not at Abraham's side, but at his bosom.

Perhaps those translating feared that bosom would lead to inappropriate thoughts about God, yet the word evokes care and nurturing and protection and intimacy and love. Our interpretations censor images for God by replacing intimacy with explanation. And so the bosom of Abraham becomes simply the afterlife, heaven, if you will but perhaps a bit sterile and safe.

But what if the bosom of Abraham is truly the intimacy it implies? Comfort for Lazarus that he never, ever received. A sense of place, of belonging for an overlooked man whom no one was willing to receive as their own. That feeling of knowing your needs will be tended, all of your needs, for all of us. The realization that the promised afterlife is all about God's love.

And what of the present-day Lazarus? What of those who find no place because of poverty or mental illness or age or race or haunting memories? What of those who are passed over by us, as we comfort ourselves with the belief that others will take

care, that welfare or the government or the agencies will deal with this need we are walking away from. How do we censor our own hearts to keep us from caring?

The parable ends by being reminded once again that seeing the unseeable, caring for the disenfranchised, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, setting the oppressed free are not only marks of discipleship or acts that contribute to the reality of the Kingdom of God in our midst. They are moments of resurrection. They bring the dead to life. And we can be a part of that new life, especially on this Sunday before Orange Shirt Day.

Let us end with this prayer by Peter Millar.

Show us, good Lord,  
How to be frugal, till all are fed;  
How to weep, until all can laugh;  
How to be meek, till all can stand in pride;  
How to mourn, till all are comforted;  
How to be restless, till all live in peace;  
How to claim less, till all find justice.  
May it be so, Amen.