

North Kildonan United Church

27th November 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Psalm 122

Matthew 24: 36-44

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

My friend Erin is a priest in Alberta. We go back to our days at the University of Winnipeg, over forty years ago now. Erin began her religious quest in the United Church, which she eventually found too shallow. She then spent a period of time with evangelicals, whose dogmatism she found stifling. In those university days she, like many of other Protestants, began attending the Sunday evening folk masses at St Ignatius Roman Catholic Church. She encouraged me to go there a few times, and I was impressed and moved by the experience. I was also aware of the number of people, young people mostly, who did not go forward to receive Holy Communion. It seemed that about a third of the congregation remained in the pew, which suggests that there were a great number of non-Roman Catholics finding truth and grace in that Roman Catholic Church. I should add that they were also hearing excellent and profound sermons by the priests of that parish.

My friend Erin attended mass on a regular basis and in time sought Confirmation and became a member of St Ignatius. She was a faithful catholic, regular in attendance at Mass and devoted to the rituals and practices of her denomination. Erin pursued her Master's degrees and doctoral studies in Germany, in Ontario and in Pennsylvania. On many levels she was happy with her church, but Erin also felt an increasingly strong pull towards ordained ministry, an option not open to her. Erin's story may be sounding a bit like a variation on Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

The United Church was not biblical and doctrinal enough, the evangelical church was too literal and restrictive, and the Catholic Church, though meeting many of her spiritual needs, was not going to allow her to live out her call as a priest, because she was a her and not a he.

Then Erin explored life as an Anglican and finally, it all worked out. That denomination, by no means perfect, has given her the ability to practice her clear calling to ordained ministry, and so many people have been blessed and enriched over the years by having Rev. Erin in their midst.

There are two reasons why I've shared Erin's story with you. Erin's spiritual journey took her to a number of denominations and expressions of Christian faith. And those church experiences shaped her belief and religious practice in such a way that she is truly ecumenical in her outlook. She may be an Anglican now, but she preaches a bit

like an evangelical, and her social justice and strong NDP politics echoes her United Church upbringing. Finally, her reverence for Holy Communion was cleared begun and shaped by her time as a Roman Catholic.

I tell you Erin's story because we should acknowledge and celebrate the fact that our congregation is made up of, and enriched by, the various religious histories and experiences we have. Some here have always been a part of the United Church, but just some. Others have had a winding path of faith that eventually found a home and a welcoming church family here.

Today we are delighted to officially welcome individuals who desire to make their church home with us. Some joining today are relatively new to our fellowship, others have enjoyed their time with us so much that they never really felt the need to join until now. So we say welcome, welcome to this place, welcome with your gifts and skills and experience to share with us, welcome to this family of God we call North Kildonan United Church. And what better Sunday to join than on this first Sunday of a new church year, the first Sunday of Advent.

Which brings me to my second reason to tell you about Erin. The last time I visited Erin, she introduced me to the writings of Malcolm Guite, an English Anglican poet, priest and singer-songwriter, as his bio puts it. Malcolm is an excellent wordsmith, and his compositions help to broaden and stretch our understanding of the mysteries of faith. And I should add that his works are solidly grounded in the Bible, grounded in the Word of God and in the rich tradition of faith we have inherited from those who have gone before us.

He is English, so some of his references need to be placed in an English context. This is especially true of his sonnet entitled "The Lectern". In many churches, the lectern is the stand from which the lessons are read. We have a lovely one over there, well made of what I am presuming to be Canadian oak, but I may be wrong. Malcolm speaks initially of those ornate lecterns carved in wood or cast in metal in the shape of an eagle, but the one he ultimately describes is close to ours. And as you will hear, he remembers in his sonnet the person who is reading from the lectern, something that I think we rarely give a thought to. We just assume the reader will stand behind the lectern and read whatever the lessons are for the day, and we give little thought about the actual person reading, and what effect those particular texts might have on them. But if I'm understanding him correctly, he is also affirming that the lectern is a comforting, strengthening religious object.

So, the sonnet, entitled *The lectern*.

"Some rise on eagles' wings, this one is plain,

Plain English workmanship in solid oak.

Age gracefully, it says, *go with the grain*.

You walk towards an always open book,

Open as every life to every light,
Open to shade and shadow, day and night,
The changeless witness of your changing pain.
Be still, the lectern says, stand here and read.
Here are your mysteries, your love and fear,
And running through them all, the slender thread
Of God's strange grace, red as these ribbons, red
As your own blood when reading reads you here
And pierces joint and marrow...So you stand,
The lectern still beneath your trembling hand.”

Speaking of items such as lecterns which bless worship spaces, the Church has always used symbols to depict the essentials of the faith.

Take for example the four gospels. For centuries, in stained glass and carvings, the church has depicted each gospel with a specific image. Matthew's gospel, which is our gospel for this new church year, is depicted with the image of a divine man. Mark is a winged lion, Luke is a winged ox and John is a rising eagle.

Of course these images are not just pulled out of a hat. Each gospel symbol is based on the content found within the gospel. Today, as we begin the year of Matthew, let's end with Malcolm Guite's sonnet on Matthew. This sonnet is full of extracts from Matthew's gospel, spun together and hinted at in a wondrous way. He writes:

“First of the four, Saint Matthew is the Man;
A Gospel that begins with generation,
Family lines entwine around the Son
Born in Judea, born for every nation,
Born under Law that all the Law of Moses
Might be fulfilled and flower into Grace;
A hidden thread of words and deed discloses
Eternal love within a human face.
This is the Gospel of the great reversal:
A wayward weed is Solomon in glory,
The smallest sparrow's fall is universal
And Christ is the heart of every human story:
'I will be with you, though you may not see,
And all you do, you do it unto me.'

Amen.