

North Kildonan United Church

14th May 2023 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Psalm 98

I John 5: 1-6

John 15: 9-17

Grant, O God, that in the written word and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Usually by this time of the year I'm fairly well along in planning my garden. Of course, mid-May, in any year, nothing will be planted at this stage, but seeds would have been bought by now and bedding plants either be picked up for a brief time in the garage before planting or I would be still in the "shopping for the best deals" mode.

Not this year. But why not, Don? After all, by July 1st your whole summer is ahead for you and you'll have time for whatever you want to do. However, I understand from reliable sources that retirement doesn't always mean no commitments and no limitations on your time – some retirees say they've never been so busy.

My reluctance to throw myself into the gardening season involves timing. This summer I will be travelling east as far as Halifax, to attend a Scottish Country dancing Summer School that runs a whole week, beginning on the 30th of July. And since I'm driving, and will be visiting family down east, as they say, I will be away for much of the prime growing season for whatever I might plant.

So basically, my timing is off for this summer. But the urge to get something planted is strong so chances are that I will still dig up the garden box, add more soil and whatever else is needed, and hope for appropriate amounts of rain and the gracious care of my next-door neighbours. And to have my fingers crossed that I will have something edible to show for my labours.

So far, in the back yard I see the promise of rhubarb, an indestructible plant that grows in spite of me, not because of me. And for several years running, the chives I planted long ago in the corner of the garden box are once again up and green. If only peas were as self-motivated and productive as chives! The rabbits are back too, looking like they successfully survived the winter, no doubt checking their cookbooks for recipes for chive and grass casseroles, garnished with tender young rhubarb leaves.

It's good to see the cycle of the seasons continue, to come through a prairie winter with all that that entails, and to see Peter Rabbit dining on my grass and running around in the rabbit paradise I call my back yard.

Whenever a garden is planted, like any other important venture in life, we wonder how it will all turn out. We put our labour into preparing the soil, we add compost and fertilizer and inoculants to enrich the environment for our plants. Basically, as the responsible gardeners I'm sure we all are, we do the best we can to give these seeds

and plants a good start in life, a fighting chance if you will, and as we do all this and more, we hope.

We hope that the rabbits will not eat up too much of the garden. We hope the weather will be favourable and mild, not too much rain, not too little rain, no more frost. So we hope and perhaps worry as we try to carefully space out those precious seeds that will produce an abundant harvest.

So much potential and hope invested in creating a garden.

There is a world of difference between planting a garden and going to the local store and buying what someone else has grown. When you plant your own garden you are quite literally invested in its success. You put your time into it. You make sure the soil is rich enough to provide a good home for the seeds and plants you hope will take root. You care about the health and well-being of what you have planted. You hope your work and attention is rewarded by a satisfying crop. Assuming of course that you take gardening seriously and see it as a venture worth investing your time and resources into.

All of which means careful planning, getting the healthiest possible plants and quality seeds, preparing the soil in the ground or in the pots if you are turning part of your balcony into a garden, diligently watering as needed.

That's one approach to gardening. On the other hand, an indifferent gardener, one who just throws a few seeds on a rough patch of ground and lets nature take its course may not receive anywhere near the same reward.

During my years in Toronto, I lived in a five-storey condo on Bathurst Street. Behind the condo was a simple parking lot and beyond that was a ravine, home to the notorious raccoons of that city. Near my parking spot there were several deep cracks in the asphalt surface. One day I noticed a few shoots of some kind of plant coming up out of the cracks. Each day the shoots got bigger and bigger and in time produced tomatoes.

A gardener's dream. Fresh tomatoes right by my car door, requiring absolutely no attention from me. All that was needed was my patience, patience to wait until they were ripe and a decent size. Finally that moment arrived and I took a tomato to my kitchen.

How would one describe the taste of this red, well formed, fresh from the vine tomato? Well, what is the opposite of taste? This promising, convenient, totally self-raised tomato was absolutely devoid of flavour and completely tasteless. Just a red ball of water and flesh. A total disappointment.

You see, nothing had been invested into this poor tomato and as such nothing was returned. Like unsolicited advice, this tomato was worth what it cost, which was nothing. Not, of course, that the tomato itself was being difficult or miserable. The tomato had never received the care, the nourishment, the encouragement, the love to grow to its

full potential. The poor thing never stood a chance.

Perhaps the problem began with the seed from which it grew. Chances are that the seed came from one of those horrible tasteless tomatoes we find sometimes in supermarkets, the ones developed to grow quickly and ship easily and are guaranteed to disappoint. If that was the origin, this little tomato plant never stood a chance!

To be a gardener is to be in a relationship with the garden. It is to care about what happens to that tomato plant, that pea seed, those carrots and potatoes and beets. It is to labour in hot weather when you would rather do something else, swat mosquitoes as you weed the garden, worry about too much rain or the lack of it, watch weather reports for early or late frosts or hail, and be patient, patient to wait for the tomato to ripen in its own time, hoping that the tomato will actually taste like a tomato.

To be a good gardener is to be invested in the garden, to put the best interests of those vulnerable seedlings ahead of our own schedules and plans. To be a good gardener is to share in the wonder of Creation, to be a co-creator with the One who in the beginning made everything and pronounced it good.

Gardening sounds a lot like parenting, doesn't it. On this Christian Family Sunday, better known to the florists and restaurateurs and greeting card merchants and chocolate makers of the nation as Mother's Day, we celebrate the family relationships we enjoy, and sometimes struggle with, and in particular we celebrate the immense gift of life and love we have received from our mothers and our fathers.

For many of us our parents have passed away, but we are the living legacy of the love and care they showered upon us through the years. Through their devotion, wisdom and sacrifice we are who we are today, and for that we thank God. And through our lives, our interests, our mannerisms and figures of speech we carry on that legacy of love from our parents. How often might we look at a sibling, for instance, and see in them an expression, a remembrance of our mom or dad, or hear an echo of a parent's voice in the words of another family member. We are nurtured and shaped by the example and the values of our parents, which we then pass on to the generation which follows us.

Of course not all parents are good and true, and unfortunately, tragically, some children are forced to grow up like that poor tomato plant in my Toronto parking spot-unloved, uncared for, abandoned.

But that is neither the norm nor the experience of most children. From what I can see, from what I experienced in my own life, I know that parents are deeply invested in the development and well-being of their children, blessing them beyond measure with firm and strong foundations of love and devotion.

We know that it is naïve to suggest that family life is perfect and pain-free. An old Chinese proverb puts it: "Nobody's family can hang out the sign 'Nothing the matter

here'." But that doesn't take away the value, the joy we experience from belonging to our families; however those families are created or constituted.

So this day, this Christian Family Sunday, this Mother's Day, we honour our parents and give thanks for our families, rejoicing in the gift which is family life and offering our thanks for those whom we number as family to us. And we give thanks for the gift of love we find in our life in Christ.

Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." In his commentary on this passage, Tom Wright says: *"The command to love is given by one who has himself done everything that love can do. When a mother loves a child, she creates the context in which the child is free to love her in return.... Jesus issues the command that we are to love one another, and so to remain in his love, because he has acted out, and will act out, the greatest thing that love can do. He has come to make us more human, not less. He has come to give us freedom and joy, not slavery and a semi-human stupor. He has come so that we can bear fruit that will last, whether in terms of a single life changed because we loved somebody as Jesus loved us, or in terms of a single decision we had to take, a single task we had to perform, through which, though we couldn't see it at the time, the world became a different place. Love makes both the lover and the beloved more human."*

As our final hymn this day we will sing what I consider to be a great Mother's Day/Christian Family Sunday hymn, written in 1636 by Martin Rinckart, the only hymn I am aware of with a reference to our mothers.

"Now thank we all our God, with heart, and hands, and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mother's arms, has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."

May God bless & keep you and those whom you love & cherish, this day and always. Amen.