North Kildonan United Church

11th June 2023 ~*Rev. Don Johnson*

I Corinthians 12: 4-14 John 15: 5-17

A Disclaimer

This sermon was first written in 2018 for a gathering of four St James area United Churches, as they contemplated a possible amalgamation into one large church. As it turned out, only three joined together, in time forming Prairie Spirit United Church.

On the 3rd of November, 2019, North Kildonan United Church celebrated its 60th anniversary, and a modified form of this sermon was preached on that day.

Today, on this Celebration Sunday, the sermon has been reshaped yet again to fit this occasion.

This is why preachers never begin their sermons with "Stop me if you've heard this before"!

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

Have you ever considered the theological significance of tartan? I'm guessing at least that you've never seen a sermon entitled *"The Theological Significance of Tartan"*, especially on such an august day as a church celebration. Never, that is, until now.

For over thirty years I've been an active member of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. And as a Scottish Country Dancer, the best thing to wear when dancing is a kilt. And it's actually a rather interesting garment to wear in the pulpit, but I digress.

So what does tartan have to do with a celebration Sunday, at a service in which the current occupant of this pulpit is gently yet firmly led away so a new minister might take up her responsibilities to be with our congregation in the next phase of your life together? That transition, that pulpit vacating is two more Sundays away so we still have a bit of time together.

So, what's with all the fuss about tartan?

First of all, tartan speaks of belonging. In the old clan structure of Scotland, the particular pattern that made up the family tartan was named after the family or clan. For instance, the kilt I am wearing is the dress or formal Macdonald clan tartan. One of the dominant colours of the dress Macdonald is white. If it was a hunting tartan, meant for more daytime and less formal use, the white might be replaced with green or another colour. Other tartans come in muted colours, also for daywear use.

Sometimes, oftentimes actually, the colours are significant. The Manitoba tartan, for instance, is described in one source this way: "The red squares represent the Red River settlement, the green squares the natural resources of the province, the azure blue squares represent Lord Selkirk, and the dark green lines are for our multi-cultural population."

But each tartan has a name which reflects some kind of belonging, and for those who wish to associate themselves with the group, the family, the clan, the province, as in Manitoba's case, or whatever else, then that tartan is the symbol of the connection. My grandmother was a Jeffrey, and in the old clan system, the Jeffreys came under the Macdonald clan, hence my choice of a rather dashing tartan. The kilt I wore on Coronation Sunday is a much more recent acquisition, and in keeping with many modern creations, its tartan design is not based on the clan system. It's almost a post-clan tartan if you will, created as an act of beauty, without attachment to historical or group connections. But I digress.

Now if we were to think of this congregation as a clan and we were given the task to design a representative tartan for our church, what would it look like? Might it have threads of blue, that perhaps speak of peace and justice, threads of green for concern for the planet and the environment, white to remind us of the tablecloths of the hospitality tables that welcome newcomers and hold the food to feed and nurture the people, red for the lively and ever-present Spirit of God and the inspired proclamation of the word in sermon and song. Might there be other colours for Sunday School and youth group and ongoing education for all ages, for prayer groups and the UCW and the men's group, colours for pastoral care and outreach. Might some of those colours be strong and bold, like navy blue representing careful stewardship, while lighter shades of blue used to represent gentler aspects of the Christian endeavour, such as our prayer shawl ministry? What colours would you use to honestly and realistically represent the nature, the ethos, the strengths, the passion, the feel of our congregation?

As I said on that 60th anniversary Sunday in 2019, North Kildonan United Church has been weaving together an invisible tartan, your unique tartan, made up of dominant colours and gentle shading which represents the nature and purpose and mission of this congregation at this corner of Pentland and Fortier.

Do you know what I mean? When a stranger enters a church for the first time, not just here but anywhere, there are certain realities that soon come to the fore. The way a person is welcomed at the door. Is it a warm welcome, friendly without being too friendly, an honest hello, we're glad you're here today, please stay for coffee after church if you have time. Or is the greeting a rather an indifferent one of "here take the bulletin and sign the book and go find a seat, we have lots of empty seats." Or is the initial welcome something else altogether. As the stranger, now past the first hurdle of the greeter, looks about, what do they see? What gets put on the bulletin board and what's left off, often gives a glimpse of the interests and the sense of mission and outreach and priorities of the clan gathered on Sundays? Are the people sitting near you friendly, with a warm smile or wary, avoiding eye contact? Are they hesitant to enter into conversation or are they trying to sign you up to teach Sunday school and join both the property and the worship committees on your first visit. Do the regulars seem to like each other, glad to see one another even though it's only been a week since the last clan gathering?

Does this church seem like one you would want to become involved in, or is it, pardon the pun, too clannish to embrace strangers into their community?

When I was invited to come conduct worship for those five September Sundays in 2019, my first reaction was resistance. I was retired, albeit early retired, and I was rather enjoying the freedom of being a pew dweller instead of pulpit pounder. But I said yes, and I've never regretted that decision.

From that first Sunday I was amazed by the friendliness and warmth of welcome I received, a welcome you also freely offer to my friends from Silver Heights who continue to worship with us. Clearly the love of Christ is alive in this place, alive in the sincere love you have for each other, alive in your willingness to be a welcoming community to friend and stranger.

So in this invisible tartan that continues to be woven through the years, I wonder what colours might represent welcoming and acceptance and friendship? They would need to be strong, vibrant colours to honestly portray the love and grace found here.

Decades ago, in 1954, in response to the development of this area, a Sunday School was begun as an extension of John Black Memorial Church. In those early days, as this fledgling congregation was developing, with every meeting and decision and action, piece by piece, the pins were set in place, and the long threads on the invisible loom began to lay the foundation for the tartan called North Kildonan.

More threads, important, long lasting threads would be added to the loom when on November 22, 1959, North Kildonan became a congregation of the United Church of Canada. The rest, as they say, is history, but it is a living history, shaped and created and brought to birth by the hard work and vision and sacrifice of the first members and adherents of this congregation, people who had a vision of what this congregation would stand for and what we would become, people who trusted that God's faithfulness would sustain and direct them, and not only them but those who would carry on this mission and ministry into the future. Today we celebrate a three year, three month and a bunch of other Sundays ministry by me but soon another minister will be with you, helping you weave an even more glorious yet invisible tartan of love and faithfulness and sacrifice and ministry. Today is but a pause in the rich history of our church home we call, quite simply, NKUC.

One more point about tartan. It only works when each thread supports the other threads. Woven tight together, accountable to each other, if you will, the tartan is strong. Once it starts to loosen, once the threads are not connecting to each other, the whole thing unravels. There is no hem on my kilt. If it starts to unravel, then I have an 8 yard narrow blanket but no kilt anymore. There was a story once of a kilt that started its life in the Crimean war-1850s. It was then used in the Boer War, 1900 and World War I. It was then taken apart and resewn so the faded parts were hidden in the pleats, and it saw service in the Second World War.

That won't be your experience, but nevertheless, each of you is a vital thread that continues to create this ever new invisible tartan, and through your loyalty and commitment and devotion to this congregation, to your congregation, North Kildonan United Church will remain a faithful, faith-filled house of prayer.

At our peril, I think, we often are convinced that everything depends on us and everything is done by us. While that is true, it is not the whole truth. We are a part of the body of Christ, as the reading from I Corinthians reminds us, and as such we are not alone in anything we do, or anything we attempt. The master weaver, the Holy Spirit, is in our midst, is with us in our endeavours and never stops loving us. So this day we trust, we celebrate God's faithfulness to us through the years and into the future.

As Nancy Dorian writes

"Dear weaver of our lives' design whose patterns all obey,
with skillful fingers gently guide
the sturdy threads that will survive
the tangle of our days."

In the days ahead, may God gently and lovingly guide North Kildonan United Church into the future God has dreamt for you. May God bless and keep you and grant you wisdom and courage as, with the Holy Spirit, you continue to weave a glorious tartan of faith, hope, and love. Amen.

The Rev. Don Johnson