

North Kildonan United Church

9th August 2020 – *Rev. Don Johnson*

Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

Matthew 14: 22-33

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

For as many years as I have had a garden, years that are perhaps better numbered as decades, I have always included tomatoes and peas amongst the crops. Well, to be honest, my garden has usually just been peas with a few tomato plants and whatever else might find space.

This was going to be the perfect year for a bumper crop of peas I thought. Finally, or I should say unfortunately, I had a summer without any extended travel plans, since events had been cancelled, so I would be home to care for, water and weed the garden. How fortuitous. What could go wrong?

So early in May I bought two kinds of peas from a very reputable seed company, as well as the suggested inoculant, and I set about preparing the garden box. The peas were planted, overplanted actually, and I shared the remaining seeds with my cousin, who also loves peas and figures she has a greener thumb than me. In fact, she thought we ought to have a contest to see whose garden would perform better.

The days turned into weeks, the plants were watered, and things were looking promising. Even the contest was looking hopeful, as my cousin told me that one of her dogs thought her pea patch was a good place to crash into.

Weeks turned into months. The garden grew and grew and grew. Of all the multitude of peas planted row by row, the total return was one plant! All the rest died without issue, as the genealogists might describe a marriage without children.

Who knew that would happen?

Who knew might also be the way to describe this year. When we had our last service together in February, who knew how drastically and frantically so much of our way of being would change a month later.

Like my optimism for a bumper crop back in May and all the other plans everyone else had, everything has been turned upside down.

But in the midst of the chaos, glimmers of light and hope still shine. I think of how our congregation faced the suspension of Sunday worship for instance. When I left in February I knew you were in good hands when Rev Brenda began her ministry with you. But who would know how confidently and competently she would take on the task of preparing and presenting the recorded services, supported by Joan's music, Peter's organization, Wilma's and Kara's videoing and editing skills, as well as our weekly scripture readers. And of course we are grateful to Gay Todd and Betty Hamilton for their excellent worship leadership these past two Sundays.

And now this Sunday. When the Search Committee interviewed me for the full time appointment, none of us knew what was just around the corner for North Kildonan United Church, indeed for the whole world. I like a challenge but I just hope that I am up to this challenge of ministry in such a different and difficult time. We shall all have to continue to pray for strength and courage for the days ahead, and trust in God's grace to guide us.

So we turn to the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament to read and seek out God's wisdom for us and for these times.

Our reading from Genesis tells the first part of the story of Joseph. We are told that Joseph was the favoured son of Jacob. He was a young man, just 17 and he worked as a shepherd, though his father also used him to keep an eye on the family. Spying and then telling on your brothers is never a way to endear you to your siblings. And if that wasn't enough, Jacob showed his deep affection for Joseph by presenting the boy with a long robe with sleeves. His brothers hated him so much they could barely be civil to him.

The lectionary leaves out a few dreams that Joseph had which intensified the hatred towards him. Foolishly Joseph tells his brothers that in his dream he basically saw himself lord it over them while they paid him homage. Growing up in a family of five boys myself, I can just imagine how popular Joseph was after that!

We pick up the story with Joseph being sent out on another spying mission on his brothers, to go keep an eye on the boys as we might say.

Just a word of clarification. In verse 12 Joseph's father Jacob is called Israel. Earlier, in chapter 35 of Genesis, we read of how God declared that Jacob would become Israel, and from him would come a great nation. Jacob and Israel tend to be interchangeable names for the same person in these chapters of Genesis. And no, it's not done that way to confuse us.

Back to the story. Joseph goes in search of his brothers and from a distance they see him. Calling him a dreamer, obviously insulted by Joseph's claims to superiority, the brothers have had enough and decide to kill the kid. "We'll make up a story about wild animals devouring him, throw his body into a pit and put an end to him."

These are some angry, vicious men, jealous and resentful of Joseph's place in their father's heart, angry that Joseph has been so arrogant with them.

But the oldest brother, Reuben, filled with compassion for his little brother, persuades the rest to not kill Joseph, but merely throw him into a pit. Reuben's plan was that once tempers cooled down, he would return to the pit and rescue Joseph. Perhaps the hope was that everyone would relax, realize how serious the situation had become and maybe, just maybe Joseph would be a little less annoying and more friendly with his siblings.

Like so many plans we make, everything was changed. The brothers see some Midianite traders heading their way so they pull Joseph out of the pit, take the hated robe with long sleeves off of him and sell their brother into slavery.

In the text following our reading, we hear of Reuben's anguish when he returns to the pit and finds his brother gone. The brothers dunk Joseph's robe in goat's blood and present it to his father as proof of Joseph's supposed death. Thus begins over 20 years of inconsolable mourning for Joseph's father Jacob.

If the story ended there, it would be a tragedy, yet one more account of tempers overriding reason, jealousy polluting the family circle, a precious life seen as something easily disposed of.

But the story doesn't end there, and you'll have to either wait for next Sunday or read the texts yourself!

There is a lot in this story about family dynamics, about resentment and perhaps poor choices. After all, Joseph is the youngest, and in the society of the day, he would be the last to receive any kind of fair share, yet his father spoils him well beyond his station in life. His father also trusts him to do tasks that are perhaps beyond his maturity level, tasks that risk the peace and stability of the family.

But there is something else. The brothers could have just killed him, and in the end it was greed that led them to sell their brother instead. But think of Reuben, the oldest in the family. He tried to save Joseph, tried to rescue a bad situation, tried to protect his father from the heartache of the loss of a beloved son. What Reuben tried to do might be described as a small grace, an act of compassion and mercy. A bit of light in a bleak, cruel, vicious story. Light that ultimately saved his brother's life.

In these pandemic days, these days of uncertainty and worry, we are wise to look for the small graces in our own lives, to cherish them and to extend such love in action to others.

Recently I was told that I had an active wasps nest above my garage door. Not the kind of news I like to hear, yet I knew I needed to do something about it. I asked my neighbour what he had used when he had wasp trouble. He pulled out a tin of spray, shook it and said there's enough here to do the job. But he kept the tin. Later that evening, unbeknownst to me, he climbed up a stepladder and solved my wasp problem. Did I mention how terrified I am by wasps! And how I worried about climbing the ladder and accidentally stirring them up and not being able to remove them. The things we worry about sometimes! But above all else, how grateful I am for his help and kindness in solving the problem.

Small graces, simple acts of kindness and caring, signs of hope and promise, these are the tender mercies that brighten our lives and help us cope with the days in which we live. And as often as not, these small graces encourage us to offer and extend our own acts of caring and generosity to others. All these are our gifts of love to one another,

prompted by a loving God if we are willing to see them that way, gifts that ease the burdens, lighten the loads and bless all of us.

Life must have looked bleak and hopeless for Joseph as he was rejected by his family and sold to strangers, taken to a strange land, with no idea or hope of what the future held in store. Yet the God who can bring light out of darkness was with Joseph all his days, guiding and restoring him so that he, Joseph, might in turn be a blessing to others.

One final story. Earlier in July I decided to visit my brother and his partner in Quebec. It would be a road trip, by myself, on the northern Trans-Canada Highway. The first night's destination was Kapuskasing, which is about 14 hours or so from Winnipeg.

The drive that first day went very well. Some sun, a bit of rain, not too much heat, only one moose that ventured onto the highway, no speeding tickets. All was well.

For the last hour or so, nighttime was settling in. The warnings about moose were on my mind, the markings on the highway were not that visible and I was on a highway I had rarely driven, heading into deeper and deeper darkness.

Ahead of me, all I could see was night, and the very occasional headlights of an oncoming vehicle. So I pressed onwards, but at one point I glanced into the rear view mirror. It was not darkness behind me, but the most glorious sunset. Perfect layers of colour, one on top of the other, spread across the sky like a huge Neapolitan ice cream block. It was profoundly beautiful and profoundly moving to see. A simple grace spread across the sky in technicolour. Quite honestly, it was the exclamation mark on what had been a pretty darn good day.

But more importantly, it was the promise that tomorrow would be another good day. "Red sky at night, sailor's delight, red sky in the morning, sailor's warning", as my mother would say. And we need promise in these days.

Now I could have focussed completely on the darkness ahead of me, and in doing so completely missed the beauty, and the promise, that was accompanying me across northern Ontario. It's all a matter of perspective I think. God did not create that sunset exclusively for me, but I believe I was invited somehow to see in that glorious sunset a promise that God was with me on my journey, a journey that night that I completed without fear or worry.

In the kindness of others, in the love extended in simple acts of caring, in words of hope and encouragement, in the blessing of family and friends, the promise of God's love is as present as a glorious sunset and is new every morning. God's mercies never end.

So as once again we look forward to sing:

*For the wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us,
Most of all that love has found us, thanks be to God.*

Amen.