

North Kildonan United Church

9th May 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“No Greater Love Than This”

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.

"Have you started your garden yet?" Yesterday a friend asked me that question. *"No, I haven't"*, I replied, and with good reason. It's been too cold!

Last year around this time I decided that I would trust the advice of the early planters and get the garden started. I only planted peas because I had been told peas like cooler weather and cooler soil. Plant in early spring I was told, what's the worst that could happen?

In our part of the world, the accepted wisdom is to wait until after the May long weekend to start planting. Better yet, plant after June 1st we are told.

Sure, that certainly sounds like good advice for tomatoes and peppers and other such delicate plants but peas like cool soil, cool days.

So, last year at this time, I set about planting an optimistic garden of peas. 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. As it turned out, the promised bumper crop never materialized, but there is always this year.

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 you 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. 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 patience from me, 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 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, and be patient, patient to wait for the tomato to ripen in its own time.

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 wellbeing 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 this way: "*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. Our gratitude is especially strong during these days of separation and isolation, as we realize and draw comfort from the deep significance belonging to our family has for us.

Jesus said "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*" He then makes mention of his own imminent future by saying: "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" Love is at the heart of our Christian faith and love is at the heart of our family life.

If we could sing in church, we would conclude our service with these words by Martin Rinckart.

*"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."*

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

Amen.