

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, June 28, 2020

“What Matters?” *(Luke 13:10-17)*

What matters? Vignette #1. Oakville in the 1950's and early 60's. On my street, the Moms might volunteer at church or in the hospital, but they did not work outside the home. They might not look exactly like Mrs. Cleaver in “Leave it to Beaver” with her perfectly coiffed hair, shirtwaist dresses and pearls, but like her, they spent their days preparing meals, baking, cleaning, doing laundry. It was a point of pride to have polished furniture, gleaming floors, well turned out children and husbands with perfectly ironed shirts. On my block, there was one exception, Mrs. Reith. Her home always seemed a bit chaotic perhaps because she would drop whatever she was doing to play with her children and spend time with their friends. The feeling in the neighbourhood was that Mrs. Reith was letting down the side: her housekeeping just didn't measure up to the standard. It was only later I heard my Mom wondering whether Mrs. Reith didn't have the right idea. The laundry would be there tomorrow. The dishes could sit in the sink. But children grow up and leave home. Time with them is precious.

What matters? Vignette #2. Back in the office I described last Sunday in the Visa Section of the Canadian Embassy in Manila, I sat across from a couple who had applied for permanent residence in Canada. Checks with the Philippine Office of the Registrar confirmed my suspicions: they had falsified their son's date of birth to turn their 23 year old into a 20 year old, eligible to accompany them. Looking disapproving, I informed them their fraud had been discovered. In my sternest voice, I lectured them on the high value the Canadian government places on truth telling. Their application would now be automatically rejected. I expected contrition. I wouldn't have been surprised by tearful pleading. Instead, the father quietly observed: you Canadians live in a safe and

prosperous country; you have the luxury of speaking the truth; for us, Filipinos struggling just to survive, family matters above all else: any and all actions are justified to keep the family together.

What matters? Vignette #3. I was anxious that everything go perfectly. It was a funeral for the patriarch of an established, well connected family. The sons stressed that it must be professional and flow smoothly because there would be important people in attendance. And, indeed, the sanctuary was packed. As I was reading from Ecclesiastes, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. It was my labrador retriever. Toby who was fearful of men, who was nervous in large groups, who never ventured into the sanctuary was strolling in, heading straight for the grieving family. Somehow, I made it to the end of the passage and scurried down from the pulpit to haul Toby out. Days later, Toby and I happened to run into the widow. Before I could apologize again for my dog's bad behaviour, she started thanking me. The service was fine, but the best part was my dog coming over and leaning against her. She felt as if he had been sent by her husband to comfort and reassure her, she would be alright.

What matters? It is a question raised by the story Laurie read for us this morning. It is the sabbath, the day, beginning at sunset on Friday and ending at sunset Saturday, set aside for relaxation and worship in honour of God's resting on the seventh day of creation, and in celebration of God's bringing the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. The Sabbath is designed as a gift, a welcome break from routine, an opportunity to experience the joy of just being alive. The sabbath is for everyone including aliens and sojourners in the land. It is even for animals who are given the day off from their labours in transportation and agriculture. Doesn't that sound attractive? For adults working at

home during this pandemic who are finding it harder than ever to stop their work from sliding into their leisure. For children and young people whose days have been dominated by screens for school assignments, social connections and entertainment. For front line workers who have been toiling in hospitals and long term care homes, in COVID testing centres and emergency services. Aren't we all in need of a Sabbath?

Over the years, we human beings have developed all sorts of rules and regulations around what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath. For instance, an older woman in one of my congregations said that when she was growing up, she wasn't allowed to play or read anything but the Bible, and was told that every stitch she sewed on the sabbath, she would have to take out with her nose in the afterlife. In Jesus' day, there are definitely regulations around the Sabbath. While it is fine, even laudable for Jesus to teach in the synagogue on the sabbath - what could be better than to wrestle with the law and prophets and reflect on how God would have us human beings live out our lives - it is not alright to do any sort of work like laying hands on someone and healing them. And yet, that is exactly what Jesus does. It might have been bit more understandable if like last week, an important person, a leader of the synagogue, had come begging for help for his young daughter or if a sufferer appealed so pitifully for relief that Jesus just didn't have the heart to turn them away. But this bent over woman doesn't have a male champion to speak on her behalf. She doesn't even approach Jesus. Jesus is the one who notices her; interrupts his teaching and calls her over. Jesus takes the initiative; he makes the decision to cure on the Sabbath.

No wonder, the synagogue leader is indignant - as indignant as the other housewives over Mrs. Reith's failure to keep a tidy home, as indignant as I was when a

birth certificate was falsified and when my dog walked into a funeral. There are standards to be kept up; there are rules to be followed; there is decorum to be maintained. It is not as if the synagogue leader is arguing that Jesus is wasting his time and attention on this nameless woman; he is merely pointing out that her healing could have waited for sunset or for any of the other six days in the week. In the synagogue leader's worldview, the rules and regulations around the Sabbath matter. After all, "remember the sabbath day and keep it holy" is one of the ten commandments.

Who can argue with such a reasonable position? Well, Jesus can and does. Jesus doesn't pull any punches: "you hypocrites!" Talk about an attention grabber. That reminds me of being called a "white supremacist" during my anti-racism training for the United Church's Candidacy board. I was more than ready to acknowledge my white privilege and unconscious biases, but for me, white supremacist was a member of the Klu Klux Klan or some other group espousing the superiority of the white race. I had never thought of myself as one. I dare say the synagogue leader and the crowd wouldn't have thought of themselves as "hypocrites" either. Just as the training video explained how the term "white supremacist" applies to me so Jesus reveals their hypocrisy. If they are willing to do "work" on the sabbath to make sure their animals are fed and watered, how much more is work justified to bring about the healing of a human being? She may not be named as so often happens with women in a patriarchal society. But listen to the way Jesus refers to her: "this woman, a daughter of Abraham". Abraham, the first Hebrew patriarch, the one to have the faith to set out on a journey to an unknown, unspecified destination, the one to hang in there even when children didn't come along, even when he and Sarah were still living in a tent as sojourners in the land.

This woman, Jesus names Abraham's daughter. She is a somebody who desperately needs help.

For 18 long years, she has been bent over. Let's try to imagine that. Never being able to look into another's face, only stare at their feet. Never gazing up at the heavens or at a bird in a tree. Probably bumping into people because you couldn't see their approach. And what about cooking or even eating - you certainly wouldn't be able to recline at table as was usual for festive meals like Passover. For eighteen long years, she has been bent over. You and I may not suffer from her physical affliction, but have there been times when we have felt bent over? Weighed down by all of our responsibilities, the tasks we need to perform for our jobs, our families, for the church, the community. No longer ready to raise our heads because we have been made to feel ashamed, certain we are stupid, useless, ugly, unwanted, undesirable. Bound by the expectations of our families, our society, around how someone of our age, gender, class should behave.

For eighteen long years, this woman has been held prisoner by her affliction. So what really matters - keeping the rules around the Sabbath or setting this person free, returning her to wholeness and fullness of life? Jesus' opponents once so sure they were in the right are ashamed while the crowd rejoices.

What matters? Again and again, our assumptions around what is important are challenged by another's actions or words, whether in scripture or in our daily lives. Again and again, we are given the opportunity to open our minds to new ideas and our hearts to compassion. Thanks be to God.