

Message for July 4, 2021

2 Samuel 6:1-9

It was the summer of 1974 and the opening act in the grandstand at the CNE that year was the Scottish World Festival Tattoo. The pipe band that I belonged to at the time, the Oakville Optimist Pipe Band, was one of the bands invited to participate and it was a lot of fun. For the four evenings that the tattoo was performed we marched out of the imitation castle and then all over the field playing different tunes. And during the time when we weren't playing? We put our pipes and drums in the bus for safe keeping and ran off to the midway where we went on as many rides as possible before we had to play again. Looking back, it was a wonderful experience, and the only drawback was that we had to march out onto the field after a mounted unit had finished performing!

On the day before the Tattoo began, there was a great big parade to kick things off. I am not sure how many there were, but numerous bands assembled in the park behind Queen's Park. There we were organized into large columns with all of the pipers at the front and the drummers at the back. Then, when the signal was given, the columns marched off, one following another down University Avenue. Needless to say the noise was incredible with hundreds of pipers and drummers all playing at the same time. I don't know what the people watching the parade thought of the music, but I am sure that we looked quite impressive!

That parade was by far the largest that I ever participated in, and looking back I realize how much I enjoyed all of the different parades, big and small alike. I did so simply because whatever the occasion may have been, the parades were all a celebration. Indeed all parades are meant to be happy, festive affairs, and the one described in today's scripture passage certainly was too, at least until disaster struck.

After years of incredible hardship and struggle, David had finally triumphed over all of his enemies; in fact David and his men had even managed to capture the city of Jerusalem, which was the greatest and strongest city in the land. Afterwards David decided to make it his new capital but this didn't please everyone; indeed, it seemed as if virtually everyone had their own idea as to where the capital ought to be and Jerusalem most certainly wasn't it! Then

David or one of his advisors had a brilliant idea; why not take the Ark of the Covenant, which was the most sacred religious object of all, and keep it in Jerusalem? It was reasoned that the ark's presence in Jerusalem would attract people to the city and help them accept it as their new capital. And so the decision was made.

On the day when the ark was supposed to be taken to Jerusalem, David gathered thirty thousand of his troops for the ceremonial procession. The ark was placed on an ox-drawn cart and two of Abinadab's sons, one of whom was Uzzah, were ordered to look after it. David also included what amounted to an entire orchestra, playing every musical instrument imaginable, in the procession as well. Finally, when everything was set, the parade went on its way and as the Bible tells us, David and the people made merry. It was a wonderful festive occasion, at least until disaster struck.

One of the oxen stumbled and the ark began to slip off the cart. Uzzah quickly grabbed it but when he did so he was struck down dead. That put an end to all of the merry-making in a hurry. Not surprisingly perhaps, today's scripture passage is one that has long troubled people. It has simply because Uzzah's death seems to be so unfair; after all, all he was trying to do was stop the ark, which was Israel's most sacred religious object, from falling on the ground.

There are several explanations for what happened that day and a popular one is that Uzzah died because what David and his men were doing was wrong. As I have already said, David wanted the people of Israel to accept Jerusalem as their new capital and he decided to gain their acceptance by moving the ark there. There was nothing necessarily wrong with what David proposed to do but did he ever stop and ask if that was what God wanted? Did David ever ask God for permission to move the ark?

Of course not! In his pride, David just assumed that his will and God's will were one and the same thing. And Uzzah, a hereditary caretaker of the ark who ought to have known better, just went along with it. The result was a tragedy, and surely there is a message in this for us.

During the past month the media has been filled with reports about the horrific discoveries on the sites of two former residential schools and even now as I write this, it has been announced that another 182 graves have been

discovered at the site of a third school. Quite naturally many people wonder how this ever could have happened, reasoning that this is Canada and besides, these schools were operated by churches!

The various governments of the time saw the schools as a solution to what they called “The Indian Problem”, but the motivation of those who actually operated the schools was often quite different. To return to the former teacher in a residential school whom I mentioned in my message two weeks ago, she sincerely believed at the time that she was doing a good thing giving the children the skills and knowledge that they needed to survive and even thrive in the larger society. And of course an added incentive for the participating denominations was that the schools were also spreading the good news of the gospel as well. As she said, there was absolutely no excuse or justification for the abuse that undoubtedly took place, but even so she honestly believed at the time that the schools were not only good for the children but by implication, even the will of God himself. Only in retrospect did she realize that the residential schools were anything but good or the will of God. Would Jesus for example have ever approved of so many of the children being forcibly removed from their homes or being mistreated? Of course not, but it is not just governments and churches that mistake their will for God’s.

Sometimes in life’s journey we decide what we want and then assume that that is what God wants too. Indeed sometimes in our arrogance we even turn to God in prayer seeking his guidance but in reality we don’t want his guidance at all; what we really want is for God to rubber stamp the decision that we’ve already made. And then we may wonder what went wrong if things don’t work out the way we planned. It is like in this true story.

A woman was approached by a man who offered to invest her money promising a return that sounded too good to be true. Instead of listening to her own common sense, she fell for the scheme and turned all of her life’s savings over to him. Almost predictably both the man and her money disappeared. The woman went to the Better Business Bureau and after hearing her story, the representative asked her, “Why didn’t you come to us first? Didn’t you know about us?” “Of course I knew about you” she replied, “I’ve known about you for years”. “Then why didn’t you check with us first?” “I didn’t”, came the honest reply, “because I knew that you would tell me not to do it”.

Now this of course is a story about us. Do we ever assume that our will and God's will are automatically one and the same thing? And then, if things don't turn out the way we expected, do we ever wonder why God broke faith with us? As David found out though, it is wrong and sometimes even dangerous to just assume that what we want is what God must want too. Whether it be as a nation, a church or as individuals, we must, to the best of our ability, try and be open minded when we ask God for his guidance in prayer. Before we make any decision, we should ask ourselves, "In all honesty, is this what I truly believe God wants, or is this just what I want?" After all, every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we say, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". This is what we pray for on a regular basis, but do we always really mean it?

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, as we come to you in prayer this July morning, we give you thanks for the gift of this new month. We thank you for this summer season and the goodness of your creation, even as we remember all for whom the heat and humidity of the past week has been a challenge. We especially pray for those living in the West where the heat has been far more than a challenge.

We pray this day for the people devastated by the house fire in Alberta, and also for the people of Lytton, many of whom have lost everything. Comfort those who mourn and those who wonder what has become of family members and friends. We ask this too for those who are still trying to come to grips with the collapse of the condo in Florida.

With the discovery of even more unmarked graves at former residential schools, we pray for our nation. Help us as a society to confront our past so that we may learn from it. Help us too as we continue the journey towards Truth and Reconciliation.

We pray this day for the family, colleagues and friends of the police officer who died in the line of duty two days ago. We thank you for the courage and commitment of all of the first responders, those whose task it is to serve and protect us all.

As the pandemic and the roll out of vaccines continues, we pray for the safety and well-being of all. Comfort all who grieve for a loved one. Grant healing for all who are ill. Guide and sustain all who are faltering on life's journey.

Help us we pray to see others and the world around us as you do; may we all be filled with the same love, understanding and compassion as you are.

We ask these things in your Son's name.

Amen