

**“Touched by the Spirit”
 Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson
 St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia
 January 13, 2008**

Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:13-17

**Spirit of Life, come to me;
 Spirit of Life, come to us.
 Sing in our hearts all the stirrings of compassion
 to shape our lives as justice.
 Roots hold us close,
 Wings set us free.
 Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.
 Spirit of Life, come to us.**

**May it be our prayer this day:
 Come Spirit, come our hearts control.
 Our spirits long to be made whole.
 Let inward love guide every deed;
 by this we worship and are freed.**

**The story of the baptism of Jesus is also our story—
 a story about our lives, about how God’s voice booms from the cosmos
 to be heard like a gentle whisper to declare deep within us,
 “You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased!”**

**With you I am well pleased.
 We anticipate and long for such words in our lives and
 even expect them once we have successfully accomplished something.
 But these words are spoken to Jesus even before he’s begun.**

**With you I am well pleased.
 Yes, those are God’s words to us even before *we* begin.
 We do not have to prove we are worthy.
 We are already loved!
 God is already, right from the beginning, pleased with us.**

**Think about the difference that can make in our lives each day,
to be affirmed even before the day begins.**

**Such a positive affirmation has the power to profoundly affect
who we understand ourselves to be
and how we will live in this world.**

**Plus, when we look at others through the eyes of God
and know that every person we meet is a person
whom God also whispers to saying,**

**“You are my beloved with whom I am well pleased”,
that radically changes how we engage with those we meet.**

There is a very wise saying that “Children live what they learn”.

It’s true for all of us:

If we live with criticism, we learn to condemn.

If we live with hostility, we learn to fight.

If we live with shame, we learn to be guilty.

and

If we live with tolerance, we learn to be patient.

If we live with encouragement, we learn confidence.

If we live with praise, we learn to appreciate.

If we live with sharing, we learn justice.

If we live with approval, we learn to like ourselves.

**If we live with acceptance and friendship,
we learn to find love in the world.**

**At the very root of who we are is the profound concept that we are loved
and that being loved helps us to be people of patience, confidence,
appreciation, justice, people who like ourselves
and learn to find love in the world.**

**As such, we are people who help to reflect into the world
positive concepts like tolerance, encouragement, praise,
sharing, acceptance and friendship.**

**Last night, the birthday of Sir John A. McDonald was celebrated
in our community and the guest speaker noted in an interview that John
A. McDonald played a key role in helping to define Canada—
not by confederation, which is what he is most remembered for,
but by how he helped us to clearly identify who we are not:
that we are Canadian and we are not American.**

The speaker noted that it would have been easy to simply merge

and become American but John A. McDonald was passionate about our identity, defined for him by who we are not. So, as ones who know ourselves to be beloved by God, as ones whose core stories declare that we are all beloved children of God, there are things that we are not.

When we live our full identity as beloved children of God,
 we are not people of prejudice;
 we are not people of hostility;
 we are not people of shame;
 we are not people of violence.

Even throughout this world and down through history,
 there is much violence done in the name of God,
 that is not who we are intended to be.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Testament (the Older Testament) is one of the passages from Isaiah that speaks of the long-awaited one who would be the Servant Leader.

Isaiah 42 opens with words that are echoed in our gospel reading today. The voice from the heavens that speaks at Jesus' baptism echoes the voice in Isaiah 42 that proclaims the mission of God's beloved servant to restore justice.

The Isaiah faithful servant will bring God's hope and healing to the world—a vision, a dream, associated with Jesus.

The Servant leader will focus on the least and the last,
 rather than on self-promotion,
 will be a just and honest leader and the outcome will be
 that freedom will reign for all.

No wonder people of all ages have longed for and awaited
 this servant leader.

What strikes me is that it is not only Jesus who is anointed and commissioned into the servant leadership role (the leaders that the world longs for and waits for).

We, too, are commissioned into such a role.

It is not only about one leader, at one time in history.

It's about that vision of servant leadership,
 those qualities of service and compassion and bringing to life
 a vision of justice and peace.

It's about that kind of empowerment happening again and again and
 again, not just through one person,
 but here and now—through us.
 As Jesus was commissioned as God's Beloved, so too are we.
 As Jesus was anointed as God's
 long-awaited Servant Leader, so too are we.
 Like Jesus, we are called to the action of building justice and
 responding to the world with compassion.

John the Baptizer was a prophetic voice in his day.
 Forerunner to Jesus, he called the people to repentance,
 much like Al Gore is a prophetic voice today.
 He calls us to repentance now,
 to turn away from how we have been living,
 to turn toward the wholeness and well-being for all creation
 that *must* become our focus.

John's was a call to repentance and a call to be prepared to be changed
 by the power of the Holy Spirit who comes with the one who will lead us
 into a new day (then and now)
 a declaration clearly made in the coming of the Holy Spirit
 like a dove in the story of Jesus' baptism,
 which echoed the story of the new day when the dove came to Noah
 after 40 days and 40 nights (or after a long time,
 which is what that metaphor means).
 The dove in the Noah story signalled a new beginning.

As a new day and a new beginning is proclaimed at the baptism of Jesus
 by the touch of the Holy Spirit who comes in a dove,
 so too God creates a new thing, a new way, through those who are
 open to the power of the Christ spirit whose power
 is shared in this world through us.
 The Christ spirit empowers us to live
 justice and compassion, tolerance and sharing.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians he identifies nine fruits of the spirit.
 He suggests that when we let the Spirit touch our lives,
 we will see evidence of that in our lives
 through the fruits of the spirit, which are—
 love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,
 self-control and patience.

I once directed a musical that described the nine fruits of the Spirit.

There was a song for each one.

**I remember being anything but patient with the song about patience:
‘Have patience, have patience, don’t be in such a hurry...’ (sung slowly)**

**I couldn’t figure out any choreography for the song, which was evident
when the actors all ended up just**

slowly doing deep knee bends all the way through the song.

**Yet, as much as I didn’t like that song, or even sometimes its message,
it’s the only song I remember from that musical.**

**It has a way of singing in my mind when I need
the power of the Spirit to have patience.**

**Whenever that happens, I have learned to pause in my frustration and
shift my focus to what I am grateful for in that person or that situation
or even just in life generally.**

And that shifts my energy from frustration to gratitude to patience.

**The gifts of the Spirit or the fruits of the Spirit are
not just a list of warm fuzzy feeling experiences.**

**When the spirit is at work in our lives, when we are open to that
booming message that whispers in our hearts like it did that day
when Jesus rose up from the muddy fish-filled waters of the Jordan,
when we live as ones who know ourselves to be beloved
and who look around at all creation and
know all creation to be God’s beloved, we are changed.**

We do repent.

**We do turn away from behaviours and attitudes that do not fit
our identity as God’s Beloved.**

**We let go of low self-esteem and replace it with high self-esteem.
We let go of those voices that murmur in our minds and cut us apart;
we allow instead for God’s voice to speak in our minds.**

**I once heard someone describe that experience
of being touched by the Spirit.**

**He wrote that he had never heard anyone speak about
baptism by the Holy Spirit before.**

**He said that “...the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that
seemed to come in waves of liquid love;
it seemed like the very breath of God.**

I wept with joy and with love.”

**In the service on Friday to celebrate Jack Hurl's life,
he had written reflections on his life and thank-you's to people.
When he talked about church, he described his experience,
which was the part of the reflection he had me say.**

One of his points was this:

**'Norma and I attended church quite regularly,
but sometimes you really didn't listen to the sermon.'
(which I add is an OK thing. Go where the Spirit nudges you or stay
with a thought the Spirit illuminates for you—
so long as you're not doing next week's grocery list).
Jack went on to say, 'You would let your mind wander and quite often,
that little spirit in you would talk to you,
telling you where you went wrong last week
and encouraging you to step forward and do
strange and wonderful things in the week coming.'**

**We give Jack the last word on that one,
not only because he likes having the last word,
but because he sums up the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives so
well...for the Holy Spirit helps us to let go of and turn away from
those things that are not a reflection of God's delight in life
and calls us to step forward
and do strange and wonderful things
in the coming week.**

**Thanks be to God's Spirit that touches our lives with the power of love.
May it be so. Amen.**