

**“Tell, Live, See, Be the Story”  
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson  
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia  
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*Gospel Reading: John 1; 29-43*

**Hundreds of years ago an invitation was extended by Jesus:**

**“Come and follow me”.**

**That invitation echoes across the centuries and stirs our lives today.**

**“Come and follow me”, Jesus says to us and  
(as the song says, and experience tells us)  
we will never be the same.**

**So what does it mean when Jesus says, “Come and follow me”?**

**What does that journey look like?**

**Jesus himself is recorded as summarizing his message by quoting  
a passage of the Hebrew scripture.**

**We are all called to ‘Love God with all our heart and mind and  
strength, and love our neighbour as we love ourselves’.**

**So, three loves: God, neighbour and self.**

**Well, actually it’s God, self and neighbour.**

**We’re supposed to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.**

**As I’ve said before, if you’re going to love me the way you love yourself,  
it is definitely *not* a selfish thing to spend time**

**working through your issues, healing your wounds,**

**so that you can learn to look upon yourself with eyes of love,**

**rather than with critical judgement;**

**so that you can forgive yourself and move forward with lessons learned,**

**rather than burdening your life with guilt.**

**Then you can love your neighbour the same way.**

**Then you can look at your neighbour—**

**whoever it is, no matter how different from you they are—**

**with eyes of love, rather than with critical judgement or lingering anger.**

**And how do we love God?**

**It’s not just a warm cuddly feeling that comforts us and soothes us with  
‘everything is going to be okay’.**

**To love God means we trust we are never alone.  
 We trust that we don't have to do it all on our own,  
 that there is a power there for us to draw upon that helps us  
 get through those tough moments in life—  
 whether it is through grief, or new beginnings  
 or walking away from addictions.  
 Loving God means we connect into that source of power to help us  
 through, rather than thinking we have to do it all on our own.**

**To love God also is to be challenged:  
 challenged to move beyond our fear;  
 challenged to move beyond our comfort  
 to see the bigger picture of the call to be concerned with  
 the well-being of all people, of all creation.**

**To follow Jesus isn't about securing a place for ourselves for eternity.  
 It's about here and now and how we allow the Christ Spirit  
 that was in Jesus to come alive through us  
 and to shine in this world through our lives.  
 In the gospel of John that we are reading from today,  
 the Christ is named as the Cosmic Christ,  
 there before the beginning of creation...  
 In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and all that  
 was created was created through the Word,  
 through the Cosmic Christ Spirit, that energy that is the fullness of life,  
 that fills all creation with the awareness that we are One  
 and so our longing, our focus,  
 is for the well-being of all.**

**And so the Golden Rule that can seem like a trite little phrase  
 is the summary of how we are called to live:  
 "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."  
 This is a rule for life that is woven into every world religion,  
 for that is the core spiritual message.**

**So when Jesus says, "Come and follow me",  
 it is into a heightened relationship with, and trust in, God.  
 And it is into a heightened commitment to challenging and shifting  
 any attitudes and behaviours that keep people in bondage,  
 that exclude, that see some part of creation**

as being more valuable than another.  
 To follow Jesus is oftentimes not about upholding the status quo,  
 but turning the world upside down,  
 challenging prejudices and narrow vision,  
 bringing healing and support  
 to the wounded places of our world.

One interpretation of what it means to follow Jesus  
 that has developed down through the centuries  
 with staggering implications is the concept  
 that the task of a faithful Christian is to convert others to Christianity,  
 because it is the only one true religion that brings you  
 into relationship with God, that brings you salvation.

That is not what we believe in the United Church of Canada.  
 Our history is full of examples of how  
 we do not think our role is to convert people, but rather to love them,  
 to respect them and to be partners with them.  
 One example is that we no longer participate in the Shoebox Campaign  
 at Christmas to send things to kids all around the world,  
 which seemed like a good project until we found out  
 that those boxes also include literature to try  
 to convert people to Christianity,  
 even in countries where other world religions are predominant.

The United Church extended an apology to our First Nations brothers  
 and sisters, first in 1986, then in the late '90s,  
 in which we asked for forgiveness for our attitudes and actions  
 that dishonoured the wonderful gifts of spirituality and community  
 that had been rich and strong before we came.  
 This apology included asking for forgiveness  
 for our role as a church in residential schools,  
 an apology given against legal advice.

Another shift that we've seen in past decades is  
 in our understanding of mission.  
 We no longer take the stand that we have all the answers and  
 so we'll come in and tell you how to make your life better.  
 Now we understand ourselves to be in partnership,

whether it's with other world faiths that we walk along beside as we  
 seek to build bridges for peace in this world,  
 or whether it's with brothers and sisters of other nations  
 who ask us to be partners in their journey, supporting and  
 walking with them on projects and perspectives of their choosing.

That's been one of the intriguing conversations amongst those of us  
 who are planning to go to our partner church in Cuba this year.

On one hand, we would like to be specifically helpful toward  
 accomplishing a project with our partners.

But the key thing that our partner church wants from us is  
 relationship, friendship, to come and discover and celebrate the way  
 they live the gospel message of caring  
 as seen through their wonderfully developed program  
 of meals on wheels that begins with growing the food on the farm,  
 preserving the food and then delivering it.

We are invited to come and learn and be changed from our North  
 American mindset that says we need lots of things to be happy, to  
 discover that it is not extra things that help us be people of joy,  
 but rather relationships.

And so we are invited to bring basic needs  
 like school supplies and medicine and  
 come learn about recycling and caring  
 and what is really important in life,  
 so that we can stop living the destructive dream of the North  
 that is contributing to  
 the destruction of our earth home.

“Come and follow me,” Jesus says.

Follow me into places where there are hungry to be fed  
 and sick who need medicine.

This is a call that takes us onto roadways all over the world.

“Come and follow me,” Jesus says, and by your actions and attitudes  
 tell the story of God's love that will not let us go.

I have been pondering the convergence of dates this week.  
 Today is the anniversary of the assassination of Gandhi,  
 who was killed by a fanatical Hindu who felt that  
 Gandhi was too sympathetic to Muslims,  
 Gandhi, who lived the way of non-violence

and called us to be the change we want to see.

Tomorrow is the day that Martin Luther King Jr.  
is honoured in the United States:  
another powerful political and spiritual leader  
who was also assassinated and who still stirs our longing for peace and  
well-being for all, by his “I have a dream” speech,  
a dream that his country is not bankrupt in its commitment to justice  
and that together we will someday build the dream  
when all are treated as equals and no more will some be  
burdened with few choices and certain poverty.

Tomorrow is also the day that some have designated as  
World Religions Day, which is an opportunity to  
“reflect on the valuable guidance and teachings of faith traditions  
that shape the lives of billions around the world;  
to recognize a common pursuit of peace, reconciliation  
and healing of the spirit;  
to break down barriers of misunderstanding not just for better relations  
among philosophies, but for a new and more just world”  
(J. W. Windland, *Encounter World Religions*).

As I think of these three days converging,  
of the anniversary of Ghandi’s assassination,  
the day of honouring Martin Luther King Jr, who challenged  
the country that honours him,  
and a World Religions Day,  
it brings home to me yet again the importance of learning  
to honour one another so that together  
we can build bridges of peace.

It shifts how we see the world from a place  
where we need to change everyone, convert everyone to our religion,  
to a place where we are called to be in partnership with one another  
as we nurture the needs of the dream of peace  
that is in the hearts of all.

When I was first ordained in 1988, twenty years ago,  
there was a change happening in our land that I didn’t have  
the energy to invest into because I was so busy helping the people of the  
churches where I had been settled to understand

**that the United Church's decision that sexual orientation will not prohibit people from being considered for ordered ministry actually is very consistent with Jesus' message.**

**The change that was happening was around religion in schools.**

**I don't know what happened here in this county.**

**This is my understanding of what happened where I was,. We were invited to expand our religious resources to include readings and wisdom from the wide diversity of world religions and to celebrate and acknowledge major festivals within the largest world religions, which would include Christian festivals, as well as Jewish and Muslim and Hindu, to name some.**

**In the county where I was, a few strong Christian voices rose up in anger declaring that our children would not listen to readings from other religions. A trustee on the school board who was in our congregation asked me if I'd be an alternate voice to those outcries.**

**I didn't, because I was already reeling from the issue of inclusivity in the church.**

**I wish that was one debate I had publicly stepped into, because it is so critical that we deepen our understanding of and honour for one another.**

**Mind you, when I wrote about honouring the many paths we can walk to God and how the closer we get to the hub of the wheel that is God, the pathways of religion that are like the spokes of the wheel also get closer to each other—**

**when I shared that image in the Pastor's Pen in the Packet & Times—**

**I was sent a leather-bound book with pages gilded in gold and told that I would be prayed for in the hopes that I can change my ways and know the true message that Jesus is the only way to God.**

**One of the things that has happened over the years is that we don't want to appear as though we are trying to convert people, and so we have stopped telling our story.**

**I don't think we have to stop telling our story.**

**We just need to learn how to do it in such a way that it does not appear as though we are trying to convert people who already have a spiritual path.**

**We have a story worth telling!  
 One of the things the Environics Project discovered is  
 that there are five things that the age group between 30 and 45  
 who are not in church would want in a church.  
 But they don't think that such a church exists.  
 But we *are* such a church.**

**Seventy-seven percent of those people said that if they could find a  
 church that has the kind of values and perspectives they seek,  
 they would be interested in hearing more about it.  
 The five attributes that they are looking for and don't think they'll find  
 (but are part of who we are as the United Church of Canada) are:**

- **Encourages questioning**
- **Respects personal freedom and choice**
- **Builds relationships with other traditions**
  - **Is open to change**
- **Welcomes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual people.**

**We are that church,  
 and so we need to be telling our story  
 of how *we* live the gospel message.**

**United Church author Ralph Milton told a story of an e-mail  
 that he received that said,**

**“I want to be a Christian. Can you help?”**

**His minister wife, Bev, suggested he ask some questions first.  
 She noted that you can't answer that question unless you know  
 who you are talking to.**

**So Ralph asked a few questions as gently as he could and then said,  
 “I'd be happy to respond when I know you at least a little.”  
 Well, that one-line e-mail had been a prank pulled on a very active  
 Christian by a friend who sent the question to hundreds of people.  
 He wrote Ralph back saying, “I have been sent hundreds of sermons  
 and lots of biting comments. Yours was the first response  
 that was kind and open.”**

**A line in the Celtic services that we do and that Blair and I always  
 notice, is a translation from Gaelic.**

**It says, “Jesus, son of Mary, mac Vairi, quiet our souls,**

**for the world is searching and  
we are the only Gospel they might ever read.”**

**So we need to tell our story and stop keeping it a big secret. It’s okay to  
tell people what gives us strength and okay to invite them to come and  
see if this place feels like a good fit for them.**

**It’s okay to tell people about things that are happening here that they  
might be interested in, without trying to convert them.**

**But we also need to live and be the gospel.  
Jesus, quiet our souls, for the world is searching  
and we are the only Gospel they might ever read.**

**What’s the gospel we hope they’ll read through our lives  
as they search for meaning and a path?**

- **The gospel that declares that love never gives up on us**
- **That the power of love can set us free from prejudices and  
attitudes of domination**
- **That there is a community that gathers to strengthen and  
encourage one another so that we can go out and make  
a positive difference in the world.**

**A scripture phrase that I turn to when times are difficult is  
from the psalms:**

**“Be still—be still and know that I am God.”**

**We are invited to come and follow Jesus and  
to tell, live, and be the story.**

**We are invited to see the places where the gospel is at work in the world,  
to see goodness growing even in a world where we are bombarded  
by stories that are not good news stories,  
to see the people we meet through they eyes of love—the eyes of God  
who sees the goodness in every one of us.**

**And so, may we see the face of God, the face of Christ, that spirit of  
goodness that was there at the beginning of creation,  
in everyone we meet, and may everyone we meet  
see the face of Christ in us.**

**Let it be so, as ones who respond to Jesus’ invitation,  
“Come and follow me.” Let it be so.**