

**“Changed by a Call”  
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson  
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia  
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*Gospel Reading: Matthew 4: 12-22*

**When Jesus hears that John (known as John the Baptizer...  
the one who came before Jesus to prepare people to hear his message  
and who was Jesus’ cousin),  
when Jesus hears that John is in prison,  
he leaves his hometown.**

**Jesus’ response to aggression is...fishing.  
This fisher of souls walks along the lakeshore calling  
those who fish for a living, saying, “I will make you human fishers”.  
He gives them a new identity.  
But the fishers were not looking for anything new;  
the call is intrusive and disruptive.  
They are sons of fishers and probably fishers for generations  
with the family fishing boat handed down,  
along with the skills of sending a net soaring over the sea  
with great expanse,  
at just the right place and at just the right time,  
using the wisdom passed on from father to son to son.  
These fishers are not looking for anything new,  
the call is intrusive and disruptive,  
and yet they are *compelled* to follow—changed by a call.**

**A call such as that may not come to our lives through the clarity of  
someone standing on the shores of our lives saying,  
“Come and follow me and I will show you  
the way to be fishers of people.”  
It’s often much murkier than that,  
but still there are calls that come in our lives and those calls change us.  
And though the metaphor doesn’t fit our lives like it fit the lives of  
Andrew and Peter, James and John,  
still it is interesting to ponder  
what it means in our lives to be human fishers.**

- For some, it means using cords of love to make a safe place for teenagers at risk.
- For some, it means using their skills to promote and lobby for an end to child poverty in Canada.
- For others, it may lead to careful attention to the size of their carbon footprint on the earth.
  - For a church, it may mean opening its doors wider and offering expanded hospitality to those lost and alone, to those seeking a place where they can share and discuss and learn to live with their questions.

**Changed by a call:**

It may not be a literal call of someone standing on the shores of our lives and shouting at us (though it could be);  
it may not have the clarity of a phone call that turns our lives upside down (though it could).

But once we hear and own the call,  
whether it's from a person, a situation, or a phone call,  
or whether it comes like a still small voice arising persistently  
from the place of sheer silence and stillness  
deep within... once we hear the call, it begins to change us—  
whether it's a call to respond with compassion  
or a call to forgive  
or a call, an urging, to stand up to atrocities and be a voice for justice  
or a call, an urging, to choose a different pathway in our own life  
that will shift us toward healing and wholeness.  
Once we hear the call, it changes us.

Recently, I met a friend whom I had not seen in over 35 years.  
I asked him (as you know I would) if I could tell his story today.  
He said, 'Yes'.

I was in the middle of preparing for a funeral when more family arrived. I was briefly introduced to everyone, waiting to hear the name of the nephew because he seemed familiar to me.

We completed our time of sharing and planning and while most of the family turned to proofing the card to be handed out, I turned to the nephew and asked,  
"Did you grow up in Acton as a teenager?"  
"Yes. Did you?"

**“Yes, (and because I didn’t go to Acton High and my sister did), I said,**

**“Do you remember Janis Hilfman?”**

**His eyes lit up and he said,**

**“Actually it’s Karen Hilfman I remember the best.**

**I had such a crush on her. She was the love of my young life,**

**though she’d never go out with me.”**

**What do you say in a moment like that?**

**“Well,” I said, “that would be me.”**

**Over the next day, we connected a few times.**

**I heard his story of how his life has been significantly impacted  
by his heroin addiction.**

**In 1992 he began a seven-year journey toward healing  
that included five trips to rehab centres.**

**The fifth time, he happened to link up with a counsellor with  
just the right style of programme for him—**

**at least one that worked at that particular moment in his life.**

**He referred to the programme as Belief, Attitude and Behaviour,**

**which is a process in which you look at the beliefs you hold**

**that are at the root of your behaviours and**

**that are not promoting well-being or wholeness.**

**Once a belief is examined and identified as unhelpful or not the truth,  
and so is let go of,**

**then the attitude and behaviour changes follow.**

**That is such an important aspect of change (and of being willing to be  
changed because we are being called away from destructive attitudes).**

**We need to be prepared to do significant self or cultural examination  
and to be prepared to challenge and**

**let go of beliefs that perpetuate destructive attitudes and behaviours,  
and therefore are not consistent with who we are called to be.**

**In the case of my friend, it was around his sense of self-worth  
that he needed to change his beliefs.**

**For us as a culture, there are beliefs that we carry deep within,  
often unconsciously, that generate negative attitudes and behaviours;**

**for example, toward poverty,**

**toward people with a different sexual orientation,**

**or toward people from a different race or based on gender.**

My friend came to the point where his self-loathing had become  
 so overwhelming he needed to change.  
 Interestingly, as he looks back, he sees the addiction as providing the  
 gift that compelled him to face his deep woundedness  
 that went back to his childhood.  
 Because of his addiction, he got the counselling that he needed.

Just recently, he discovered a new aspect of the healing  
 that he's been living for the past decade.  
 He became aware of how much his heart,  
 which was for most of his life like a black lump, had awakened—  
 a discovery made and confirmed by his heart feeling like it was broken  
 by a relationship break-up.  
 Through that experience, his heart cracked open  
 and he discovered love pouring out of it for the first time in his life.

As he pictured the outpouring of that love,  
 he saw spots of darkness of old pain.  
 But he discovered that as he acknowledged that old pain,  
 it dissipated and was gone.  
 He discovered that love has the capacity to expand the heart,  
 and through that awakening,  
 which he rightfully names as a spiritual awakening,  
 he began to feel a nudging, a calling, an emptiness  
 that he wanted to fill appropriately.  
 And so he has arranged to start next month to work in his local high  
 school with troubled teens.  
 And that's a significant piece in the spiritual journey.  
 As we shift our attitude and do our healing  
 and open ourselves to our higher power,  
 the next step is *that call to serve*.

When we respond to the call that rises up within,  
 whether it's a call to repent, to turn away from that which separates us  
 from the divine or from the fullness of life,  
 or from those things that indicate that we are missing the mark in life  
 (to use an archaic term)  
 or a call toward something specific, some way that we are called  
 to share who we are more fully with the world—  
 the call will be unique for each of us.

**Calls come and meet us in the circumstances of our lives,  
whatever they are.**

**So...how do we hear such a call?**

**One way might be described as a strong urging.**

**When people come and talk to me about something they feel called to,  
I often hear an urgency in their voices,  
a certainty that surprises them.**

**I often experience a sense of confirmation of their call  
by tingles rushing down my spine.**

**Another confirmation of a call seems to be tears welling up,  
often for both me and the person.**

**It feels like the movement of the Spirit has just filled the space and  
touched us with joy.**

**I noted many moments of deep calling in the movie at the  
Mariposa Arts Film Night this past week.**

***Shake Hands With the Devil* is Romeo Dallaire's story of being  
the general in the Canadian peacekeeping troops in Rwanda  
before and during the genocide that lasted 100 days  
when over 800,000 people were slaughtered.**

**Dallaire was ordered not to use arms unless in self-defence, an order  
that was difficult to adhere to as he watched the days unfolding.**

**But he did.**

**And then a call came from the United Nations.**

**He sensed what was coming and begged that the order to withdraw  
not be given, for if all the troops were to withdraw, the 30,000 people  
they had in the compound under their protection would be killed.**

**The order was given.**

**Dallaire, who believed that obedience was key to ensuring the effective  
work of troops, felt called to declare,**

**“I regretfully cannot accept the order to withdraw”.**

**Eventually he was given permission to stay with a reduced staff  
that had to volunteer,  
a staff of less than 300 people.**

**The Serenity Prayer says it well:**

**God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,**

and the wisdom to know the difference.  
 Sometimes it seems like we have little choice in a situation.  
 But the one choice we have is how we will choose to respond  
 deep inside of us.

I got a delightful story this week about a man who was ninety-two and  
 who simply had no choice but to move into a nursing home.  
 While he was slowly walked down the hall with his walker to his room,  
 the attendant described the room.

“I love it,” he stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old  
 having just been presented with a new puppy.

“Mr. Jones, you haven’t seen the room; just wait.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with it,” he replied.

“Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time.

Whether I like my room or not doesn’t depend on how the furniture is  
 arranged. It’s how I arrange my mind.

I already decided to love it.

It’s a decision I make every morning when I wake up.

I have a choice:

I can spend the day in bed recounting the difficulty I have  
 with the parts of my body that no longer work,  
 or get out of bed and be thankful for the ones that do.”

At the funeral here yesterday of Shelley McGruthers who died at 35  
 years of age in a crash on Rama Road earlier this week,  
 her sister Tracey spoke.

She reflected on the choices that she faces.

She acknowledged that she could be bitter and angry at the senseless  
 death of her sister and let that consume her energy.

But she is choosing to not let that be her primary focus.

Instead, she is choosing to hold onto all she is grateful for  
 and to move forward aware of how precious every day is and  
 how important it is to regularly declare  
 our love and appreciation of one another.

I saw the movie *Bucket List* this week.

It’s a good movie.

The characters played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman have  
 both been diagnosed with cancer, with limited time to live.

Together they create a “Bucket List” of the things they want to do before they kick the bucket.

There’s a wonderful scene of the two of them sitting on top of the pyramids.

Morgan Freeman’s character (who is a wealth of information about everything, which makes him brilliant at Jeopardy) tells Jack Nicholson’s character that in Egypt the story goes that you are asked two questions that decide whether or not you get into heaven:

1. Did you find joy in your life?
2. Did you give joy to others through your life?

A call to joy changes us, and as Jesus said, the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand—right here; right now.

A question that often stirs in people’s minds is—how do we know when we are truly being called, rather than just wanting something that will satisfy our ego? Goodness knows, we hear lots of urgings in life, and they aren’t all going to lead to greater wholeness or well-being.

Well, here’s one way to check it out: is this strong feeling something that reflects, for example, the two primary commandments of the call to love God with all our heart, mind and energy, and to love our neighbour as well as ourselves?

Love is the foundation of a call that comes from that higher consciousness.

I have experienced that.

A call often has an edginess to it.

It takes us out of our comfort zone, but still it feels right and, if followed, it will honour the two commandments Jesus named and lived.

Another way to test a call (a way that I’ve shared before) is one that was shared with me when I was feeling called to not be ordained.

I had completed all the steps for ordination.

Everything in me screamed,

No!! I can’t not be ordained.

Everyone, including Alan, is expecting me to be ordained.

What will this do to my family of three  
 (Sarah had been born by then)  
 if I choose, after five years of preparation, to not be ordained?

Then I had a dream that was filled with certainty—  
 of a large hairy hand squeezing the life out of my heart,  
 which I interpreted would happen to me, if I was ordained at that time  
 (not a good way to love and honour yourself).

John Buttars, my supervisor for my internship,  
 shared a practice with me from Ignatian spirituality.  
 He invited me to imagine myself on my death bed and to look back to  
 this moment to see which path would be the one I'll wish I'd chosen—  
 a great way to gain perspective.

I chose not to be ordained at that time,  
 a choice that proved in many ways to be right.

Changed by a call.

Our lives are intriguing pathways that weave and wind  
 around each other, creating surprises and recurring options  
 and changes in our lives.

That day in the gospel story, when Jesus was walking along the  
 beautiful shores of the Sea of Galilee  
 when he called out to James and John, Peter and Andrew,  
 they were not looking for anything new.  
 The call was intrusive and disruptive.  
 And yet, they felt compelled to follow;  
 they were forever changed, as was the world.

Where are you being called or nudged these days—  
 not out of a sense of 'should' or external expectation,  
 but nudges that arise from deep within?

- Are you being nudged to heal a broken relationship  
 or to let your heart expand to forgive yourself or another?
- Are you being nudged, like my friend, to serve in some new way?
- Is there somewhere you feel a charge of positive energy and  
 excitement when you think of something happening?
- Are you being called to deeper listening and being a presence of  
 simply being there to hold the space for others?

How are you being called?

**Whatever it is for you, whatever it is that feels risky or exciting or simply right and is consistent with the two commandments—**

- **watch for opportunities that will open up for it**
  - **listen for that still small voice**
  - **journal, write poetry, paint**
- **debate it with a friend you trust.**

**Whatever method works for you...just don't ignore those nudgings.**

**Who knows what those nudgings will lead to that will draw you more fully into the fullness of life?**

**Who knows the healing or the growth or the positive difference you'll make?**

**Listen for it and let yourself be changed by that call.**

**Let it be so.**