

**“Wrestling With: Change and Limitations”
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia
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**Grant us, O God, a heart renewed.
Speak to us afresh of your life-giving word...**

**The story of the woman at the well is a story of daring,
a story of cracking open impeding beliefs,
a story of incredible change that banished limitations and
extended an invitation into the fullness of life.**

**We begin our reflections on the story today by wandering into the story,
looking through the eyes of the Samaritan woman
who went to the well that day, at the height of the heat of the day,
to ensure that she would be alone...
so that she would not give opportunity for the other women
to boldly ignore her.
And her life was changed.**

**“It is a lonely place sitting on the edge, and there I was
at the edge of the well, not daring to look at him,
but watching his reflection.
He was looking at me.
I knew I shouldn’t have, but I turned to look at him.
He looked away to stare at the water in the well,
and scooped some of it up as if playing with it,
letting it run through his fingers.
Without looking at me, he spoke,
‘You’ll always be thirsty, you know’.
Of course I knew, but I also knew he wasn’t talking about water.
He was talking about love.**

**“It is a lonely place being on the edge, and there I was,
on the margins of the community,
the despised gender of a despised peoples.
Yet he just sat there.
He made a point of noticing me.**

At first, I imagined it was some service he required.
 The longer he sat there, the easier it became.
 I enjoyed his presence.
 My soul was calmed; my faith grew by the edge of the water.

“It is a lonely place sitting on the edge, and there I was
 at the edge of life, and the stranger knew how much on the edge I sat.
 He knew me well—a prophet!
 We conversed and spoke of religion and faith and ancestors and
 how I was longing for the Messiah.
 He said, ‘I am he’.
 Now I knew too much, and I was changed.

“God, quench the thirst of those who long to be included,
 to be part of a family, to be loved, those who sit on the edge,
 for there is nowhere else to sit.
 May they sit here, and may we be found with them.
 God, touch the voice within us that has been silenced;
 voices of justice and inclusion, voices of love extending into the margins.
 Sit with us and empower us
 to be your strong witnesses in our world.

God, when we long for the Messiah may we find you
 in the faces of strangers and in the least expected places.
 Give us the courage to search in the dark places of our lives
 and in the unknown places beyond ourselves
 where we will hear you say, ‘Here I am’,
 so that in discovering you deep within our lives,
 we may be changed, empowered by life-giving water
 to move beyond the things that limit us.”

Wrestling with change and limitations...
 The voice and reflections of the unnamed woman at the well
 becomes an echo of our voice and our longing for a world
 where we discover the life-giving,
 thirst-quenching power of love.

Wrestling with Change

At the United Church’s General Council meeting in August, 2006,

a workshop on leadership for these times of change that we live in
 noted that, as people who live in a time of change,
 we require leaders who can see the ‘big picture’.
 That leadership is a requirement not just within clergy.
 We need leaders of change who see the big picture
out there in the everyday world, making a difference.

Jesus was clear with the woman at the well that day:
 you get to choose; we get to choose.
 We can choose to accept all the limitations that others have placed on us
 and that we have placed on ourselves.
 These might be limitations based on our beliefs about ourselves,
 or the limitations that come when we believe
 that we are alone in the struggle of life,
 and so overwhelmed that we have no choices.
 We can accept those limitations and sit at the lonely place at the edge
 and look at the world with frustration,
 weeping at the disasters of our world community,
 finding people *out there* to lay our blame upon
 OR we can choose a different path.

The leader of the workshop on leadership in these changing times noted
 that society is currently experiencing a moment of
 “...great, profound, reweaving of the cultural fabric”.
 She noted that, “In these times of change we are faced with
 two different kinds of problems:
 technical problems and adaptive challenges.
 Technical problems, while they may be very complicated, can be solved
 using expertise, knowledge or previous experience.”
 I like the technical problem identified in the joke that always
 catches my attention by its opening line:
 How many choir directors does it take to change a lightbulb?
 Answer: Nobody knows. Nobody ever watches the choir director.
 That technical problem never happens here. Blair is too lively!

Adaptive challenges occur when “...we know the problem, but we don’t
 see the solution—which are inevitably spiritual challenges.
 They ask everything of us and take us to places
 we didn’t necessarily plan or want to go.”
 Adaptive challenges are like ‘swamp issues’.

**They are scary, we can become bogged down,
and there is no obvious way through them.
Yet swamps are also places of purification, complexity and life.**

**The author of the workshop suggested that,
if you dwell in the swamp, it becomes fascinating.
One can find a way through, but it will not be obvious at the beginning.
She notes that no one has the exact vision of the outcome.
What is needed in these times are people/leaders with clarity of purpose
who know why *it matters* to make our way through to another place.**

**The workshop leader commented that people who are faced with an
adaptive challenge often will try either to turn it into a technical
problem or engage in a ‘work avoiding activity’, suggesting that war is
often a technical solution applied to an adaptive problem.**

**She suggests that as people who are called
to provide leadership in the world,
whether it’s in the political realm, the business, world, the church,
or in our own families, we will be called to deal with adaptive change.
We need to be willing to draw attention to issues and challenges,
but also to express care and reverence for the things
that will be lost when change occurs because,
as she notes and as we are aware, people do not resist change.
We do resist loss.**

**Jesus was constantly challenging people and inviting them, and us,
into adaptive challenges.
He was totally committed to creating a challenge to try to change
systems that held people in limitations,
constantly modeling what it means to see every person as worthy of
honour, respect and love from others and from themselves.**

**In his meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well,
he broke through so many limiting beliefs.
He spoke to a woman (not done in his culture in a public place),
he talked to her about theology (also not done, *ever*),
he engaged with a Samaritan (a race considered of little worth, for they
had dishonoured the cleanliness laws by intermingling pure blood
of the Hebrew people with other races).**

Then Jesus demanded that the woman speak the truth of
 who she is and how she lives.
 He continued to talk to her even when the tough stuff of her life
 was revealed, laid bare between them.

The result of climbing over all the limitations was that
 the woman ran boldly back into the town where she was so rejected
 and boldly declared that she had met the one
 who came to lead us into deeper relationship with God,
 into deeper relationship with ourselves and each other.

Changed by breaking out of limitations.
 Jesus said to her and says to us, 'Come and stop letting your self-
 fulfilling limitations be the nourishment you eat.
 There is life-giving water to nourish your soul and quench your thirst
 for meaning, your thirst for a source of power to strengthen you
 and give you courage to enter into the unknown,
 trusting that we will be led'.

Wrestling with Change

I love the quote from theologian Paul Tillich about change:
 "God grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change,
 the courage to change the one I can,
 and the wisdom to know that that's me."

I remember about a decade ago, my husband Alan came to me and said,
 "If I become a grumpy old man as I keep getting older,
 like so many that I see, call me on it...
 so I can change, and go back to seeing what matters
 and go back to caring."

Wrestling with change.
 Can we actually make a difference?
 In a world that seems time and again to have gone crazy,
 can we make a difference?
 The answer is a resounding 'Yes!'
 When we change our thinking,
 when we change our beliefs that do not honour that we are all one,
 that do not honour the need to seek well-being for all...

when we are willing to shift our thinking from our top priority
 being a large bottom line
 or a family that needs to appear to be the perfect family,
 when we change our thinking about what limits us and instead see and
 claim the transformative power we have within us—
 our shifts in thinking help to shift the universal consciousness.
 It takes a very small percentage of the population on the planet
 to shift us all toward a new way of seeing,
 a new way of being,
 that does honour that we are all one and that knows
 that what happens to one person, one part of creation,
 happens to all of us.
 Changing how we see the world changes the world around us,
 in our own relationships,
 then ripples out to the world.

What we need to do is ensure that our thinking and our behaviours
 and our beliefs and our attitudes
 are all adding to the increase of things such as

- letting go of racism
- letting go of homophobia
- letting go of destruction to the earth for the sake of comfort
- letting go of judgments that label people and limit them

It is our thinking, our beliefs, that shift us toward
 a more sustainable ecological future.
 It is our thinking that helps to shift us toward a world that sees
 differences as gifts, rather than threats,
 that sees growing relationships as blessing,
 rather than wanting to jealously hoard our territory.

And so, in the midst of life, we need to ensure that we surround
 ourselves with people who model the life we aspire to,
 choosing to intentionally find friends and acquaintances
 who inspire us to deeper humanity.
 We need to choose to spend our time in activities that build our dreams.
 We need to consider that what goes into our bodies
 has a physiological relationship with our minds,
 the place where we can change, to bring transformation.
 So we need to eat mindfully and exercise mindfully,

**and create time
for our minds and hearts to unite in meditative states,
however you individually do that.
It is critical that we refuse to buy into self-limiting beliefs
and to choose not to dwell in negativity.**

**The story is told that, one evening, an old Cherokee chief told his
grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.
He said, “My son, the battle is between two wolves.
One is destructive. It is anger, envy, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity,
guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.
The other is life-affirming.
It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence,
empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.”
The grandson thought about it for a minute, and then asked,
“Grandfather, which wolf wins?”
The old Cherokee chief simply replied, “The one you feed”.**

**May we choose wisely, so that we, like the woman at the well, can step
beyond limitations that bind us,
so that we may declare by our living that we draw our strength from
that life-giving water and so that
we can be the part of the change the world needs.
As Ghandi said, “Be the change you want to see.”**

Let it be so. Amen.