

**“Power for the Journey”  
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson  
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia  
April 27, 2008**

**Gospel Reading: John 14: 15-21**

**When I as doing the Ignatian spiritual exercises  
(a year-long process of prayer that you commit to for a minimum of  
an hour a day, plus a weekly meeting with your spiritual director),  
the first reading I was given to pray with was a passage  
from Hosea where God speaks of a love for us that is so deep that  
God simply cannot give up on us:**

**“I was there with your first trembling footsteps  
and I held you tenderly to my cheek.”**

**“How can I give up on you, though you have wandered far  
from the path I set before you?**

**How can I abandon you?**

**I cannot...I cannot desert you.**

**Though it would seem that my ways weary you,  
though you tire of me,  
I will not desert you!”**

**These were words that I needed to hear.  
They touched a tender place deep within me which needed to hear the  
assurance that, no matter how far off the pathway I have travelled,  
God has not abandoned me.**

**I am loved.**

**We are loved, like an infant.**

**We are held tenderly to the cheek and loved,  
though we fuss and fume and are cantankerous.**

**The annual week of guided prayer here at St. Paul’s is based on the  
style of the Ignatian spiritual exercises:**

**Praying with scripture and allowing an awareness to arise in us  
through the words of scripture and from beyond the words in scripture,  
to speak to us at our place of deepest need.**

**The theme of this year’s week was around journeying with Jesus.**

**Sandy Mitchener wrote a wonderful reflection for the closing worship.**

**“My mother was not a keeper, not a sentimental pack rat like me.**

**But surprisingly she did keep my first pair of shoes.**

**The little shoes were in the cedar chest I inherited  
after my parents died.**

**For some reason, I took them out of the chest and have them sitting  
on my dressing table where I see them every day.**

**But I never really gave the shoes much thought until  
this Week of Guided Prayer.**

**Reflecting on the journey of life, reflecting on walking  
first steps, baby steps, I had a revelation!**

**“When I am inclined to be hard on myself, self-critical, judging myself  
harshly, I need simply to look at those tiny shoes and  
I remember that I was loved.**

**I imagine my parents, grandparents, and nine-year-old brother holding  
my hand as I took my first steps.**

**“It’s not hard to make the leap from the world of imagined memories  
of my first steps to my world today.**

**I am a child of God.**

**You are a child of God.**

**We are loved from our first step to our last step.**

**Thanks be to God!”**

**That’s one of the central messages that we need to be living in this world  
of brokenness and horror.**

**The world still is filled with so much possibility.**

**We who know ourselves to be worthy of love,  
who know that every person we meet is worthy of love,  
need to be part of the transformation that must happen  
in this world of ours.**

**We must shift from the “love of power’ being the fuel that energizes our  
lives to the “power of love’ being the energy and focus of our lives.**

**It is the power of love that needs to be the power for our journey,  
rather than the love of power that is so central to empire thinking,  
that is at the foundation  
of our North American lifestyle.**

Here are two stories of the difference that shift makes,  
both from United Church Camps where people experience  
the power of love (rather than the love of power).

The first story is about a little guy who was just seven years old.

This was his first experience at a United Church camp.

He already really liked his counsellor, Ian,  
who had grown up at United Church camps.

But on the first night the kids just wouldn't settle down,  
especially one unruly child.

After repeated requests to go to sleep, Ian was exasperated and shouted,  
"Go to sleep. NOW!"

Then he went around the cabin tucking in the covers at each bunk,  
leaving the unruly boy until last.

To Ian's dismay, he saw tears rolling down the boy's cheeks.

Ian felt terrible.

The very first night and already he had made a kid cry.

When he asked the little guy why he was crying, the kid asked,  
"Are you tucking me in?"

Baffled by the question, Ian simply answered, "Yes."

Still sniffing, the little boy said,  
"I've heard about being tucked in,  
but I never had anyone do it."

Sobering, isn't it?

Seven years old and no one had tucked him in before.

Ian made sure that young fellow got tucked in every night,  
because Ian remembered how important camp had been  
for him as a youngster.

In fact, Ian gave his United Church camp a lot of credit for helping him  
to grow up and become the confident young man he was.

When summer was over, Ian spoke to his congregation one Sunday  
morning and told them about this little seven-year-old.

Then he said, "If it wasn't for Mrs. Lidster's gift to us  
(he meant the bequest she had left in her will for the congregation to  
help send kids to camp), that little boy could not have come to camp.

Camp changed his life.

At the end of the week, that boy told me he couldn't wait until  
he grew up so he could be a camp counsellor, too."

**Ian ended by saying, “Mrs. Lidster’s gift changed that kid’s life.”**

**There were nods all around the congregation.**

**Then old Mr. Renfrew stood up and said,**

**“Mrs. Lidster’s gift not only changed that boy’s life.**

**It changed your life too, Ian, and it has changed all of us**

**here this morning, just hearing you.”**

**This morning here at St. Paul’s we will participate in a baptism.**

**In every baptism, we make a promise as a congregation to support all children and youth in our care on their spiritual journey,**

**so that they can become fully alive, fully human,**

**capable of giving and receiving love,**

**capable of speaking out against injustice in the world,**

**capable of making a difference.**

**Every time we give of ourselves to help make that happen—**

**whether it’s through financial support,**

**volunteering our time and talents, through our prayers—**

**we’re helping in the development of children’s lives.**

**In a world where there are so many choices,**

**we’re helping them discover their worth and the gift of who they are.**

**Every time we give of ourselves—**

**like Tommy Moffatt did with the Tommy Moffat Fund for Outreach**

**that was created from Tommy’s bequest to the church—**

**we are helping.**

**Some of that money is being invested in an outreach project that was**

**dear to her heart throughout the years of her life.**

**Hillcrest Lodge will be re-opening soon as housing for vulnerable**

**seniors, thanks to the dedication of volunteers**

**like Ken McMullen and the Hillcrest team.**

**So Tommy’s legacy of caring continues on, even after her death.**

**Another story of the difference we make when we provide programming that helps promote the things we value:**

**In the 1920s, a boy lived in the west end of Toronto.**

**His mother took him to mass each week.**

**He was a faithful Roman Catholic until he died in 2002.**

A year before he died, he spoke of his time as a camper at Lake Scugog Camp, a United Church camp here in Toronto Conference.

He said that back when he was growing up, Toronto was different.

Boys stuck to their own kind.

Chinese. Black. Italian. White Protestants.

The street of west Toronto had gangs of boys running around,  
and when they occasionally met, fights often broke out.

So when he went to Lake Scugog Camp, and when he was assigned to cabin #4, and when he saw across from him in the next bunk a Chinese boy whom he'd fought with on the street, he knew he was in for an interesting time.

“Lake Scugog Camp was run by the United Church”, he said,  
“and they'd take anyone.

Catholics like me, Chinese, Blacks, even Jewish boys were at our camp. Lake Scugog Camp changed my life and made me who I am.”

Some of you may know the name of this man: Johnny Lombardi, the founder of Toronto's multi-ethnic media empire.

“Lake Scugog Camp made me who I am.”

Camp is a significant way to immerse children  
into what we say we value:

an opportunity to create the kind of community we hope we can build in the world, a place where we practise healthy community.

That's what we do at camp, in small groups,  
in our Sunday morning programs for our children and youth,  
in worship,

in our caring for each other and the world.

We practise healthy comments here, so that it becomes so much a part of who we are that we carry it out into the world like yeast.

That yeast may help the world rise up to what we are capable of being,  
a world-wide community built on compassion  
and a commitment to well-being for all.

The headlines sure make a person wonder if it's possible.  
But it is!

I love the line in the gospel of John that says Jesus said that we'll do even greater things than he was able to do

because we have each other and because we have the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us to listen to our higher self, to nudge us toward that demanding way of life where love and compassion are the power we choose to live.

This week I heard a wonderful story of caring. I was talking to Ken Hammond the day that his son, Dean, was having surgery. He told me how Dean was anxious on the weekend, as the surgery came closer. On Saturday night, there was a knock on the door of their home in the States where they live. It was one of Dean's life-time friends, originally from here in Orillia. His friend now lives in the Peterborough area. He drove the 600 miles to be with Dean for just a few hours, to give him strength, and to bring him a casserole.

That's what we do when we send dresses to orphans in Zambia, or when we send money to the daycare centre in South Africa to Poppy, or to the Stephen Lewis Foundation for Grandmothers to Grandmothers, or to Guatemala with Judith and David Rapson, or to the Downhams to the borders of Thailand where they are there for refugees from Burma.

And it's from that core desire to reach out and care, to be an expression of God's love that will not give upon us or let us go that we are prompted to be actively involved in more than charity, but also in justice  
 ...in actively seeking healing and reconciliation and justice around abuse in the aboriginal residential schools  
 ...in the multitude of ways the United Church of Canada has given voice and action to justice issues, from the right for same gender marriage, to the call for change to move toward ecological sustainability, to the initiative called United for Peace with programs to deepen our awareness of what it means to live the way of peace, to our work with partners all around the world walking with them as they seek their dreams for wholeness.

As we think about what powers us for the journey, the words of a friend of mine, Bruce Seebach,

**(who writes many of the resources for the Week of Guided Prayer)  
remind us that in this journey that can overwhelm us there is a power  
there for us to connect to, to empower us for the journey.**

**He writes of prayer, saying:**

**“The value of prayer is not necessarily found in the prayer itself,  
but in the effect it has on me after I have prayed.**

**Prayer is one way of following Jesus who modelled,  
in stillness, storm and stress,  
the reality of the Divine Presence.**

**Like Jesus’ prayers, our prayer needs to be honest, personal,  
persistent and simple.**

**In a world full of connections that often fail us,  
prayer is the one thing we can count on to be up and running.  
Prayer enables us to reach out and take the hand of support in the midst  
of our sinking feelings...**

**I discover prayer does not take away my dark side  
but empowers me to see it with light.**

**I find prayer changes the pray-er.**

**I experience myself being held by the One who loved me into life from  
my beginning and who loves me into abundance  
in my present and future.**

**I pray because I dare not do otherwise.”**

**And so it is that we can say:**

**Thanks be to God for the good news that there is a power  
we can draw upon that is found deep within us and all around us,  
that empowers us for a journey  
toward wholeness and abundance.**

**Let it be so in our lives.**

**Amen.**