

**177<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY**  
**“Quilting ~ Peace: Piece by Piece”**  
**Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson**  
**St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia**  
**May 4, 2008**

**Scripture Readings:**

**Micah 6: 6-11, Ephesians 4 selected verses**  
**John 10:10b and 14: 12, Matthew 5:14-16**

**Anniversary Sunday:**

**...a time to praise God for the ways**  
**that God has led us in our past,**  
**is with us in our present,**  
**and to ask for blessings for the future.**

**Anniversary Sunday:**

**...a time to look at our story as a church**  
**and to notice the ways we are living Micah’s famous injunction to**  
**seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God.**  
**...a time to celebrate how all our gifts combined**  
**have helped to build the world up in love.**  
**...a time to notice whether we are letting our light shine**  
**and how we are letting the spirit help us do together**  
**even greater things than Jesus did.**

**Let us pray:**

**Creating God, you piece together the fabric of our lives**  
**creating beauty and goodness in ways that**  
**are often not seen by us in the moments of our lives.**  
**And yet through your persistence of using thread that is made of love,**  
**you stitch a quilt of wonder, made of pieces of**  
**our gifts stitched together with pieces of the gifts of others;**  
**made by the mingling of different types of cloth...**  
**with the bright coloured cloth from the joyous moments of our lives**  
**enhanced by the sombre cloth**  
**from the moments of difficulties in our lives.**  
**Piece by piece you create with us a quilt that reflects**  
**the deep peace you and we long for.**  
**Help us, O God, source of deep peace and abundant love,**  
**help us to offer more and more pieces of our lives**  
**to help create a quilt of peace to enfold all the earth.**  
**By the power of the spirit we pray.**  
**Amen.**

The other day at dinner, Alan and I were talking about how difficult it is to feel like you can make any kind of positive difference in a world that is so strongly committed to the love of power, which is repeatedly at the root of so many horrific realities intimately known to us in our multi-media world.

I was telling Alan about our conversation with Environmentalist/Author Alannah Mitchell the other night, where we talked about the concept of the 100<sup>th</sup> monkey—  
a concept that for me is filled with hope!

This concept says that it takes a relatively small percentage of the world's population to shift awareness and understanding sufficiently for this shift to become the awareness and understanding that we hold in our universal consciousness.

Scientists first saw it amongst monkeys. It is explained in this story.  
One monkey was taught to wash her food before eating.  
Soon the other 98 monkeys on that island began to copy her.

Then scientists amongst monkeys on another island were astounded when a 100<sup>th</sup> monkey on their island—  
not connected to the first group of monkeys—  
began washing its food before eating.  
That led to the awareness that if enough people carry a thought or have an understanding of something, then it becomes known to the masses.

And that's what gives me hope.  
We are all connected and it is through all our gifts combined that we will build the world up in love.  
Hope grows for me as more and more we understand that we are all connected....  
as more and more we understand that what happens to one of us or one part of creation happens to all of us.  
It is like we are all pieces stitched together in one quilt.  
If the stitching begins to unravel in one corner or if one type of material in it becomes thin and starts to disintegrate, (like some material did on one of our quilts at home) this impacts the well-being of the whole quilt.  
So, too, with our earth community.

I shared with Alan that I think this need to keep growing in our awareness that "we are all one" is a significant part of the spiritual awakening on our day...

so that we become more aware that we can make a positive difference.

We can be part of changing this world,  
piece by piece and moment by moment in our lives.  
We can help to shift the world from love of power motivating us  
to the power of love motivating us.  
We help this shift happen through our thinking,  
our choices, our attitudes,  
our certainty that there is hope...  
so that we don't drown ourselves in despair,  
a despair that we too often try to medicate by soothing ourselves by  
more and more stuff, a response that is creating problems  
in our earth community, our consumer-driven culture.

Then Alan made a comment that prompted me to tell him,  
‘Hold that thought. I want to write it down.’  
He noted that “You’re not going to see that you are changing the  
world...but as the world changes you are going to know  
that you’ve been part of that change.”

On this Anniversary Sunday, we ask ourselves the question:  
how have we been part of living the gospel message  
of the transforming power of love  
in our personal lives and in our life together as St. Paul's?  
In what ways have we been part of changing the world  
in positive ways?

Two years ago, for our 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I went back through the  
history of St. Paul's to see if I could discover recurring themes  
in our story of the ways we have made a difference.  
As I researched, I identified four different streams or themes  
that have woven throughout our St. Paul's story—  
in the past, present, and no doubt into the future.

The first theme that I discovered throughout our story  
is that we have been bold in our vision.  
Dave Austin, then chair of the Board, spoke about our bold vision.  
The story I love most is how, when we were a congregation of 130  
people, we built this sanctuary that would hold over 600 people,  
confident that we had something to share with people beyond  
those currently here.  
That's bold vision!

The second strand that has been part of our story is music and drama,  
a part of our story that is still such a significant part of who we are.

**Blair spoke of that part of our history,  
though he edited out my rather irreverent comment  
about the history of the choir that has moved a multitude of times—  
and that I referred to as the beebopping choir.**

**Bonnie Taylor, Sunday School Co-ordinator two years ago, spoke of the  
stream of commitment we have for Christian Development.**

**A key story for me there was of how in the mid 60s  
this congregation embraced the new curriculum that a lot of churches  
protested, a curriculum that informs this congregation yet today  
as being a place where we seek to learn from current Biblical  
scholarship and where we look at scripture not as literal,  
but rather filled with metaphor and truth and insight of value  
beyond the particulars of a story.**

**The final piece that I found repeatedly quilted into our story was a  
passion for social justice, which Betty Noganosh spoke of,  
a theme that continues to be part of who we are.**

**You might remember that we had 13 people from each of these four key  
areas of our life at St. Paul's (so 52 people)  
come forward and place flowers that created the sign of the rainbow,  
the sign of God's profound love for creation,  
a love that we are called to carry into the world.**

**This week I spoke with Matt Lennox, who was part of the first Enquiry  
Group that I led here. Matt leaves on Wednesday for a tour of duty in  
Afghanistan. I asked him last night if I could share a piece of our  
conversation in my reflections this morning.**

**Like Alan and I, Matt and I were talking about our passion  
for helping to build a world where all are cared for...  
where the well-being of all is taken into consideration  
as we make decisions to help move us toward that shift  
that is so critical in our times—  
a shift from the love of power to the power of love  
as our motivation.**

**In our conversation, Matt and I talked about how critical it is that we in  
Canada not turn our back on horrific situations that are happening  
around the globe, thinking it has nothing to do with us.**

**Matt commented that he thinks of that story of the man on the beach  
throwing star fish that had washed ashore back into the ocean.**

**There are thousands along the beach and someone asks him,  
'Why do you bother? There are too many to make a difference.'**

And the man answers,  
 'It makes a difference to this one'  
 as he tosses one more into the sea.

Piece by piece we build peace.  
 In each moment we're never sure that the path we are choosing will be  
 acknowledged in the future as the best possible choice,  
 but in the moments of our lives we need to keep choosing  
 what we see as the best choice that is before us,  
 to help grow goodness in this world.  
 Matt talks about how the mission trip he went on  
 to Cuba from St. Paul's changed how he saw the world...  
 and forever changed him.

Piece by piece, the quilt of our lives is pieced together.  
 Sometimes it is only in retrospect that we can see  
 how all the pieces fit together to create the big picture  
 of our individual lives and our life together,  
 but along the way we get to make choices that will influence  
 what the quilt will be like.

A number of years ago, this church adopted a policy that ensured  
 that all people are welcome for the key celebrations of life.  
 It was our membership policy, which is clear that membership is about  
 responsibility and commitment, rather than about privilege.  
 We decided that this would be a church where the doors are open wide  
 and all will be welcomed.

Therefore, full membership would not be the criteria  
 for weddings, funerals, baptism.

The criteria would be commitment to preparation,  
 so that as a church we are helping to ensure that marriages we share in  
 have a strong foundation around communications skills  
 and conflict resolution, which are taught in our  
 Relationship Enhancement Workshop.

All who get married here sign up for it.  
 And all those who being a child to be baptized spend time preparing by  
 exploring their own spiritual journey and the gift of being within  
 community as we help our children, and ourselves,  
 grow to become all we can be.

A few years ago, we adopted another policy around the mandate and  
 stewardship of this building that also declares  
 that the doors of welcome are open wide to partner with groups  
 whose purpose is aligned with our goals of:

spiritual development, responding to the hurts of the world,  
 inclusivity, developing the arts (particularly music),  
 working toward creating a world of justice and compassion.

Both of these policies, which are consistent with the four strands  
 that weave throughout our story, have laid the foundation for us  
 to intentionally engage with the community around us.

In the Editor's Observation this month in our magazine, *The Observer*,  
 David Wilson tells how *The Observer* came to be a sponsor of the Royal  
 Ontario Museum exhibit "Darwin and the Evolution Revolution".

Apparently many people felt that was too hot a topic  
 for corporations to sponsor.

David writes that the project being sponsored by *The Observer*,  
 when others wouldn't, has clearly "touched a nerve of goodwill toward  
 the United Church" (even though this is a project of *The Observer*,  
 which is not directly the United Church).

He writes, "I've been amazed by how many people have written or  
 called to say how proud they are to be United Church members.  
 I've been doubly amazed by the number of people outside the church  
 who've called to express their admiration."

He concludes with this thought:

"I wonder if there isn't a lesson here for the United Church  
 as it discerns a path into an uncertain future:  
 engage with the culture, and maybe the culture will engage with you."

On our Anniversary Sunday it's a good time to look at  
 what kind of 'big picture' we reflect out to the community around us.

What do all the pieces of this church community look like  
 when they are stitched together?

What does the quilt of St. Paul's look like?

During this past year, we've had a number of people share with us how  
 they see St. Paul's in very positive and quite frankly, startling ways.  
 One happened just this week when Alanna Mitchell and her husband,  
 Jim Patterson, who's from the Toronto United Church Council, were  
 here for Alanna to speak at Wisdom Circle.

Jim often calls St. Paul's one of the "sparkling congregations"  
 amongst the 300 congregations of Toronto Conference.

When they arrived the other night and wandered around for a bit and  
 saw all the people gathered all over the church,  
 that was confirmed for Jim.

Alanna speaks of St. Paul's as the one place that feels like her spiritual  
 home, though she's been here only three times.

**Last June, we were in conversation with a minister from the States about our 15-hour a week position. She forwarded me an e-mail about St. Paul's that she received from someone from the Six Nations in Brantford who wrote:**

**“I am utterly thrilled that you are considering St. Paul's Orillia. It is one of the most exciting places in Ontario right now, as prophecy is unfolding about it (Orillia) being the centre for spiritual transformation... St. Paul's has hosted many gatherings about healing and spirituality...”**

**These comments from within the Orillia community itself reflect back to us how we have been experienced by some:**

- **When the Muslim Youth Association came to town on a Sunday morning looking for a church to partner with them for an interfaith dialogue, they were told by more than one person at the eight churches they went to first:**  
**‘Go to St. Paul's. They do interfaith type things.’**
  
- **In a conversation about the location for a special event someone said,**  
**‘I think St. Paul's is the place where it needs to be because (this from a person who doesn't go to church themselves)**  
**“St. Paul's is the sanctuary of the City”.’**
  
- **And then a few months later, two people from our congregation sat down at a concert and said hello to the woman beside them. She asked them what church they were connected to. They told her St. Paul's, to which she commented:**  
**“St. Paul's is the heart of this city”.**

**Random comments, bits and pieces of conversation stitched together, help us to see the beauty of the quilt we are creating.**

**It's a quilt that tells the story of St. Paul's,  
a story filled with pieces of passion for justice,  
pieces of beauty created by the music that fills this place,  
a quilt rich with an abundance of a variety of ways for people to express  
their faith and grow in their spiritual journey,  
a quilt filled with pieces that reflect the shared laughter and tears,  
the struggles and insights of life in community,  
the gift of rituals marking life transitions.**

**It's a quilt that, when the pieces are stitched together,  
creates a vision of a community  
willing to be bold,  
willing to risk so that together we can live the gospel message  
that we articulate for ourselves in our direction statement where we say:**

**“Prompted by the urgings of the Spirit,  
the congregation of St. Paul's United Church will be  
an inclusive, energized and life-giving community  
which actively witnesses Jesus' message of love for all.”**

**May it be so,  
as we are empowered by the awareness that  
we are not alone, that we live in God's world.  
Thanks be to God!  
Amen.**