

**SEASON OF LENT IV**  
**“The Guatemalan Journey”**  
**Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson**  
**St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia**  
**March 22, 2009**

**Scripture Readings: Mark 12:28-34**

The Season of Lent ...  
a time of reflection and discernment  
a time of determining and noticing  
which of our actions, attitudes, thoughts, and life-style choices  
**keep** us in healthy relationship  
with ourselves, each other, the people of the earth and the earth itself ...  
and therefore keep us in healthy relationship with God ...  
and which do **not**.

Ash Wednesday (which is the day that the Lenten journey begins)  
is a day of lament and confession –  
when we name the ways that we have **strayed**  
from pathways that would lead to health and wholeness  
for ourselves and for the earth community.  
It is a day when we seek forgiveness  
and make a commitment to repent.  
To repent is to turn away from  
actions, attitudes, thoughts and life-style choices  
that are not life-giving –  
that separate us from God.

In the story of Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days,  
(which is the story that the season of Lent is based on)  
Jesus wrestled with choices and options  
around how he would do his ministry –  
how he would serve and honour God’s vision for his life.

**Anytime** we stop to think about how we will live our lives –  
we realize there are lots of options before us.  
Amongst those options are things that seem tempting ...  
but when we look at the bigger picture –  
we realize they don’t become building blocks  
to creating a world of peace or a way of life  
that leads to wholeness or well-being for us and our earth home.

When I returned from Guatemala I experienced culture shock –  
coming back into this culture where we are so overwhelmed by stuff,  
we don’t always see how that stuff  
has distorted our perspective or our relationships.

The first meeting that was on my agenda to go to after I returned –  
was to discuss St. Paul's finances.  
As I arrived at the meeting I started to shake –  
knowing I would be going through the door  
to discuss our priorities for the close to \$500,000 we raise in a year  
-- \$500,000 that we've had lots of options  
around how it would be spent for a lot of years –  
choices that are becoming more limited.

Some of the realities, that together we are faced with, include:  
1) that we need more money directed toward covering core expenses –  
of building and staff that provide significant resources  
for the programming, outreach and mission we do as a church;  
2) plus the demand is growing in the world around us  
of people needing help for basic day to day expenses –  
to ensure that people are not sleeping in vacant, cold buildings  
and that children – well everybody – are not going hungry ...  
and at the same time – the market plummeting – eroded financial resources.

More than ever – (it seems to me) –  
we are being pushed into a time of discernment  
→ **to identify our priorities and the message we want to live.**

One of the stories we heard several times in Guatemala  
is about the prophecy of 2012.  
In 2012 – at dawn on December 21<sup>st</sup> –  
the Mayan calendar is complete –  
it will have completed its 13 cycles of 400 years each.  
The prophecy says that at the time the world as we know it will end  
→ which is not an end of the world,  
fear-filled doomsday story for the Maya people  
→ they see it as a new day.

And, in reality, the world  
as we have known it through our life-times,  
has to end its onslaught of devouring the earth ...  
we have to change the way we live  
and be clear about the priorities in which we will invest.

One way is to shift to live the concept of “enough” –  
which is to only use what you need to have enough –  
so that you have some to share –  
so that there will be enough for everyone.

On our first morning in Guatemala we went to a village  
to see a preschool that had been built  
at the request of the women in the village.  
Sharon took us – she is the North American woman  
who is the founder and energy behind Mayan Families –

which is the group with which Paso Por Paso works  
(which is a group of retired teachers from Orillia).  
The preschool was a delight – filled with vibrant colours  
and the children whose big eyes quickly worked their way into our hearts ...  
with tentative smiles on faces that showed only lingering effects  
of the malnourishment that was fading with the impact of food served at school.

I sat down at one of the tables to play with a group of kids  
who didn't seem to be joining in the play as much as some of the others.  
Blair sat down as well –  
and started to play one of those colourful 10 key toy vibraphones –  
the kids gathered around.  
They recognized the tune of Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star  
and eventually sang while Blair played.  
Later, as I stood with Sharon  
as she described the work they were doing –  
I was told that the little one I had been sitting by should actually be in school –  
but there was no sponsor yet to provide the money to buy the supplies –  
and her family could not afford it –  
so she stayed at preschool. I asked how old she was ...  
(since physically she was the same size as the other preschoolers).  
She is eight – tiny because of malnourishment.

We left the preschool and went to two homes.  
At one of them – a woman my age –  
sat on her bed with her daughter at her side.  
She was blind – a surgery gone wrong.  
And she was hungry – though more concerned  
about the hunger of her elderly parent and the children.  
The only money they had went toward a casket to bury a family member –  
generation old traditions demanded a proper burial –  
even though it meant the family would go hungry ...  
glimpses of poverty wove together with glimpses of joy  
seen in the connections amongst the people.

The next day we went to Tierra Linda –  
the village where Paso Por Paso works.  
One of the things we saw was the distribution of the annual micro loans  
of 1,000 quetsals each (which is approx. 160 Canadian dollars).  
It was hard seeing some get a loan and others not –  
which is literally based on the luck of the draw for those who did not get one last year –  
a method that the women themselves chose.

Later in the week we visited our United Church partner –  
the Fraternidad group where the founders and primary leaders are all Mayans –  
with one North American person who is from their partners –  
who does some of the teaching and the translating.

In this group the micro loan concept has had longer to evolve.

There they call it a revolving loan.

All the women in the 28 women's groups receive a loan every year.

The groups range in size from 7 women to 40 women.

The loans are up to 5,000 quetsals.

All the women have to submit their plan and budget for their loan and it is checked to ensure that it upholds the values the group has identified including healthy nutrition and farming practise that are ecologically healthy.

To be eligible for a loan –

women need to participate in on-going workshops – which the teaching staff provides – 1) a monthly workshop that is a Bible Study based on liberation theology that focuses on building self-esteem and understanding that spirituality is part of every day life, not just for an hour and ½ on Sunday morning;  
2) a regular workshop with the agronomist – Ernesto – who teaches about things like composting;  
3) a bi-weekly workshop with Denise on nutrition – where the women have learned that it's not good to feed their children candy but to choose fruit or veggies instead.

We had the chance to hear the stories of 17 women in a Mayan village talk about the impact of the Fraternidad on their lives and how it has helped them be good supporters of their families.

One of the stories that many of them shared was how they learned about not using plastic bags.

Carmelita encouraged them to carry their traditional baskets and cloth to the market and then to put into a piggy bank how much money they saved by not buying plastic bags.

They all broke open their piggy banks together and were amazed at how much money they saved.

Not only did they save money but they created a healthier world by not using more petroleum to make the plastic – and not burning it in their homes where the fumes created pollution.

They showed us their community project as well – which is a field for potatoes with a compost pile on the side.

The potatoes will be used for their own families, to generate some money by selling them – but they will also be used for their food program for the sick and elderly of their village.

There are so many stories to share – but that's enough for today.

But arising from all the stories I invite you to join with me in this Lenten season to reflect on “What is enough for us to live on” ...

Rather than feeling we are entitled to have things ... ask ourselves the question “What is enough?” ...

Rather than feeling we have to spend money on things to please other people – (whether it's fashion or expensive restaurants or significant gifts) –

what is enough? And it would be good to ponder the question  
“What changes do we need to make  
to ensure that our carbon imprint on this earth is lessened?” –  
which we can do in many ways including less use of plastics –  
like our partners do in Guatemala.

As we journey through this Lent let us ponder –  
“What message do our children and grandchildren and neighbours  
and sisters and brothers in other lands read from our lives?  
Do our lives reflect the message we want them to share?”

Along with Guatemala there was so much  
in Barbara Coloroso’s talks that touched me.  
Her summary of it all is powerful.  
She repeatedly says: We need to be people who care deeply.  
That’s how we’ll pass it on to the children of the world,  
and not just care because our heart is touched  
but care through a heart and mind response –  
so we can plan a response that is transformative  
and not just a band-aid response that we hope will silence the pain.

We need to model what it is to  
care deeply  
share generously – which we can do more easily  
when we live the principle of “enough”  
and help willingly.

Like Jesus – may we be led into the wilderness of our lives  
so we can discern how we will live so our lives will reflect  
God’s intention of wholeness and well-being  
in this one earth community.

Thanks be to God – that we are not alone on the journey to the fullness of life.  
Amen.