

“FAMILY: COLOURING OUTSIDE THE LINES”

**Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson & Monica Moore
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia
Sunday, May 10/09**

Family Sunday – a focus that for some can be filled with wonderful warm feelings, but
for others,

it can be filled with painful memories
.....of never fully being accepted in family
whether it is our own family
or the family of the church.....

The poem “On The Outside Looking In”
was written by Wendy Rigby
based on a lived experience

of sitting outside a church in the rain
so she could hear the music

.... not going in because she didn’t think she would be
accepted by the family that is the church.... because she was gay.

ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

• Author Wendy J. Rigby

*As I view the Chapel on the hill
I hear the Church bell ring
From a distance I recall the song
The choir starts to sing
The congregation’s standing firm
I kneel outside the gate
And wonder when they’re taught to love
Why do they practice hate*

*I glance toward the open door
To view the closing mind
That will welcome me if only
I will leave myself behind*

*They sit behind those four dry walls
I kneel here in the rain
Perhaps it will disguise these tears
They’ll never know my pain*

*When the rain subsides I smile
As a rainbow forms above
While they focus on their preacher
I’m content to view God’s love*

*The choir ends the service
And I sing it as I go
Yes Jesus loves me
The Bible tells me so*

*I say a prayer for them each night
They say my life's a sin
So on Sunday you will find me
On the outside looking in*

*I pray I live to see the day
We all shall rise above
Our differences and prejudice
United by God's love.*

At one point in her life,
Wendy was the lost sheep of Jesus' story,
but by God's grace she was found.
When I knew Wendy, she had been fully embraced
by a United church congregation
- her and her partner Kim -
and both of them were helping us on the road to becoming
a more welcoming place to the queer community
(a name chosen by gay people)
By sharing the story of her "lostness", and her "foundness"
she helped all of us understand how amazing that journey could be.

The story of the lost sheep is nothing if it is not a story of
radical inclusion.
The good shepherd leaves 99 perfectly respectable, obedient sheep alone and unguarded
to seek out the one who
- for whatever reason - is lost.
The story shows us that following Jesus is not about
keeping the majority safe and secure;
Jesus calls us to the edge of our world
to seek out the ones past the margins.

I think this is an important story for Mother's Day.
Now don't get me wrong, I love my mother,
and she deserves her day,
and I do hope that all you Mothers out there
have a great day.
Over the years, however, I have learned from
many parishioners
that Mother's Day makes some feel as though they are
"on the outside looking in."
Maybe their relationship with their Moms,
or their kids, is painful.

Maybe a woman has never been able to bear children,
though she desperately wanted them.

As a single Mom,
Mother's Day has been pretty much a non-day.
I still went home to cook my own meals
and clean up afterwards.
Mother's Day – if you believe the ads –
holds up as an 'idol'
the 'perfect family' – Mom, Dad, 2.5 kids
- a false idol, as we all know.

So in true United Church fashion
we call it "Christian Family Sunday",
but even with this Karen and I want to
"Colour outside the lines" a bit,
and think about the ones on the margins
who God is calling us to seek out.

Some who have experienced
being on the margins around this topic of families,
are same gender couples.
I have heard people name that
they feel very comfortable supporting healthy, loving,
same gender committed relationships....
so long as we do not describe such committed relationships
using the word marriage.

It is good to name that struggle,
because it allows us to begin to identify and explore
what it is we really value – what are our core values....
– if one of our core values is to
celebrate and support healthy, life-giving, respectful relationships
– in what ways do our thoughts on same gender marriage
reflect that core value
an important question to ponder
if we are committed to our values matching our attitudes
and how we live day to day.
Being in family together,
– as ones who understand ourselves to be brothers and sisters...
– often demands that we rethink our first response attitudes,
....so that we can ensure that do not exclude or reject
or imply that someone is second rate.

And that's not easy stuff – shifting deeply held perceptions is huge ...
It was huge when we finally realized that,
though the Bible said that slavery is acceptable, ... it is not
... It was huge when we awakened and said "no" to apartheid

... It was huge when women got the vote
... And even when the United Church of Canada
faced it's first woman who was a mother with young children
who wanted to be ordained in the 1960s.....
– though we'd been ordaining women since the 30s
– that first woman didn't know
whether or not she would be ordained
until an hour before the ordination service

... It is huge to get our head around
a shift that challenges the way things have been
–but often, afterwards we wonder why.

In 1992 – 4 years after the United Church of Canada
agreed that sexual orientation would not be a deciding factor
in whether or not someone could be ordained or commissioned
– both Monica and I were at General Council
(not that we knew each other at the time).
Stan McKay became our moderator at that meeting.
Stan is aboriginal.

When asked how he would deal with “the issue”
(of ordaining homosexuals)
he replied he simply did not see it as an “issue.”
In the aboriginal community it is simply accepted that
some people will be homosexual
and they are often the ones with accelerated creativity
– the poets, songwriters, and artists.

That same summer of 1992,
we voted to support covenanting services for same gender couples.
Immediately following the vote, we sang, “This Little Light of Mine.” When we sang the verse
that says that:

we will “let our light shine in our hometown,”
.....I wept – for I knew that the people I loved in my hometown,
in my church in Comber,
would hate the motion I had just been part of supporting
– of same gender covenanting services....
– but I could not vote any other way and
be true to the value of what I understand
of Jesus' call to love one another,
of Jesus' call to reach out to those most excluded.

The question of whether or not St. Paul's
will include same gender couples in our marriage policy
is a decision we are yet to make.

People are often surprised when they hear that
– “didn't we already do that? and if not, why not?”
Families who share a home –

come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes and combinations.
My understanding of what constitutes a healthy home
is a home when there is love, respect and honour toward each person,
even if it colours outside the lines

Monica:

I, myself,
have only been involved in three same-gender marriages.
The interesting thing was that in two of them
the couples decided to create their own service
based on the values
that they believed were the basis of their relationships
- things like
equality, respect, care for the earth.
They did this of their own accord
with no prompting from me.
I have had a heterosexual couple do that – never.
I guess sometimes you can only appreciate your rights
when you have had to live without them first.
I have since used their examples to inspire all the couples I marry
to look at their shared values.

Karen:

I have spoken to people over the years
behind closed doors
as they have worked through
how they will expand their thinking
to stay connected to a much-loved family member
who has been open about being gay.
Often, after a very short time,
people have shared how natural it has been,
and can't imagine why they struggled.

When I was a child, my sister Janis and I played a game
(you may have heard me tell this story before.)

I was 7 or 8.

The game was that we would each choose people
to be part of our new imaginary family.
Janis kept coming up with ideas – she kept choosing famous actors.
I could think of no one.
Finally I claimed the Beatles
– I was pleased with myself until Janis said
– “too late – they are already part of my family.”
So I said “fine, you choose whoever you want and I’ll take the rest.”
“Are you serious – you don’t want people who are in prison?”
“Yes I do. Anyone you don’t want – I’ll take.”

For years I'd walk around and look at people and think,
you don't know this, but I chose you to be part of my family – years ago.
And that impacted my life.

Deep in the marrow of my bones,
I feel deep sorrow
anytime I see or hear of someone
who others reject or deny who they are.

Mind you, I was raised by a Mom
who was on the first national committee
that developed designated parking spots for the handicapped
and wheelchair accessible washrooms.
Deep in the marrow of my bones
is a longing for all to feel welcomed, cared for, loved.

Sometimes we need to colour outside the lines
to expand our ability
to honour one another
and reach out with compassion and care.

Monica:

And so may we seek to reflect
the kind of attitude that we hear that God has
in the story Jesus tells about going to find the lost sheep.
May we create a community
that is safe to be who you are – with an openness to differences,
and where each person is loved, welcomed and found.
May it be so. Amen.