

**“Celebrate Life”**  
**Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson**  
**St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia**  
**July 26, 2009**

**Scripture Readings: Passages of Hope & Encouragement**  
**Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Mark**

In the July – August Observer – our United Church magazine –  
a title caught my attention -“Recovery Redefined.”

The article talks about a service in Brockville called “Celebrate Life”  
- a service which recognizes that “we are all recovering from something.”  
-“recovery” encompasses everything from –drugs & alcohol to hurt & loss at this service.

Questions stirring in my mind arose from 1) reading that article  
2) combined with a number of conversations I had with people this past week

The one among many questions that distilled for me is this – how do we cope –  
What tools do we need to be using – at times when we have experienced hurt or loss.

What do we do when our expectations in life come crashing down?

We all have expectations and dreams of how life will go  
and those dreams and expectations don’t tend to include things like

- our children being diagnosed with cancer
- losing our job
- marriages breaking down
- physical injuries that change lives
- Alzheimer’s robbing retirement dreams
- financial losses

- dreams of how things will be in our families, our church  
- but they’re not – they’ve taken a turn – new generation’s perspective.

Unfulfilled expectations when life is turned upside down. A huge topic. . .  
one that we can only just touch on today – though in many ways we are constantly touching  
on this topic when we gather as a community  
- as a community of prayer and compassion, of support and action.

To begin to try to get my head around this question  
of “how do we cope – what tools are there that we might use  
- when our expectations & dreams come crashing down?”

I’ve been looking at the four components in the great commandment  
– Love God – with all your heart, mind, body & soul  
(actually it says strength rather than body – but here I’m going to use body).

So, what helps our heart to cope? when life is turned upside down  
and we’re faced with something that is a reality  
and our only choice is how we’re going to respond?

One out of many possible answers is with prayer – but what do we mean by prayer?

Peter Wyatt, past principal of Emmanuel College,  
writes about prayer in the Observer this month.

Peter & I both studied at Emmanuel at the same time – he was working on his Doctorate and I  
was in class working on my Masters degree with his wife Joan,  
and we often saw things differently than Peter.

His conclusion is that prayer is an intentional effort to draw deeper into,  
and reconnecting with, that life energy that helps us to remember who we are,  
helps us to remember that we are loved,  
that helps us to remember that every person we meet is also beloved.  
That energy is there to comfort us and gently nudge us,  
and prayer is time set aside that allows us to reconnect with God  
in whatever way we experience God.

Over the years I have heard stories about how prayer has actually separated people from God,  
when I've heard comments like this: "I prayed that my child would live but she died"-

what kind of God would allow such a horrible thing to happen?"

a question asked in anguish – from the depths of despair –  
where God is absent where God is the accused.

Well, that question leads to the next question:

What helps our minds to cope in the face of lost dreams and lost expectations?

One thing that I would note is that sometimes we need to unpack some theology  
that resides in the corridors of our minds that is unhelpful to us coping.

And for me – that's the case anytime I hear people declare  
that God has been the cause of a tragedy.

Now that school of thought can be found in scripture  
- that says people get sick because they somehow deserve it  
– but I don't buy that school of thought.

There's another whole school of thought in the Bible  
that is much more consistent with my understanding, my experience of God . . .  
in which we *don't* see God being like a puppeteer who comes down  
and decides who will have cancer or whatever tragedy is being faced  
and we *don't* think that if we pray hard enough  
the God who caused all this will somehow reverse it . . .  
but rather we understand that that presence of the power of love is with us  
when we walk through the valleys of the shadow of death in our lives  
- whether it's the deaths of our dreams or the death of our bodies.

I remember my supervisor telling me a story  
when I did my field placement years and years ago now.

He told me about how he was called in to do the funeral of a 2 yr old.  
He arrived at the funeral home and people were saying to Mom and Dad,  
"It's God's will"

or, "God needed another little angel."  
or "you're never given more than you can cope with"

Don, my supervisor, was horrified and he tossed aside the service he'd prepared  
and he spoke from his heart.

Now the situation of the death of this little one was that  
Mom & Dad had been fighting.  
Mom jumped up from the dining room table and ran out the house  
but didn't know that the 2 yr old had followed her.  
She jumped in the car and she roared out the driveway,  
and she hit her daughter.  
Well, that's *not* God's will, that's *not* part of some re-arranged or pre-plan,  
it's *not* God's need for another little angel.  
God, Don said to those people that day, was the first one to weep  
primarily to weep for the mother,  
though God knew that that little one would be surrounded by love and by light,  
God's tears, if God were a person and personified, God's tears would be for the mother.

For our minds to cope  
for our faith to help our minds to cope,  
there are times that we need to unpack theology  
that is inconsistent with the understanding of God being love.  
In the question of, "how do we help our minds to cope  
when we are faced with the ending of dreams or expectations;"  
yesterday in our Small Group, someone shared the sign, in sign language, for perspective,  
How do we get perspective?  
Sometimes we *need* perspective, a *different* perspective when we are faced with difficulties.  
The sign for "perspective," is one finger up and two fingers pointing toward that one finger  
but then it turns and goes the other way.  
The person that shared this sign with us said, 'every time I use that sign it reminds me that I  
need to change my perspective sometimes to be able to see clearly,  
I need to look at things differently to come to a deeper awareness.'

What helps our soul or our spirit cope in the face of loss?  
or changed expectations?  
The one theme that jumped out at me under this theme is forgiveness;  
finding a way to forgive ourselves or another for whatever burdens we carry  
-whether those burdens are real or imagined.  
Again, this is a huge topic,  
but as we go into what we hope will finally be the lazy warm days of summer,  
I want to share with you an image of forgiveness  
that perhaps will help us do whatever work we need to do in this area.  
So first in the area of forgiveness,  
we need to know that when we say we're going to forgive,  
it does not mean that what happened is okay.  
When we look at things that we need to do forgiveness around,  
first off, one thing to do, particularly if we're forgiving ourselves,  
is to identify what our learnings are  
in the situation that we need to forgive ourselves for,  
and once we've learned what it is that we need to learn,  
then we need to work at forgiving ourselves;  
not to say that it's okay  
but to say that I'm going to now disconnect from this energy in the past  
and bring my energy to the present

so I that can move forward and use that energy for good.

There's a story years ago – I was just 9 or 10 years old myself when I heard it –  
of a mother whose child was kidnapped and murdered.  
I saw that story on the TV and then about 3 years later I saw her at the Court case,  
and she said that she forgave the man that did that to her daughter.  
The reporters were shocked that she could forgive that person  
but she said, 'I have to because I'm not going to stay in bondage to him,  
I'm not going to let him have more power in my life, I am choosing to forgive.'

An image that Carolyn Mace give us,  
is one that if you imagine that you have a series of 100 plugs of energy that you can use in  
any given day – and if you think of it being like an old telephone switchboard –  
you can take any one of those plugs and plug it in anywhere you want to.  
I remember when somebody asked me, 'how many plugs of your energy do you have that  
you're sending back into the past,' and I said 38.  
38% of my energy goes to the past?  
Wow, that doesn't leave very much for the present,  
and that wastes an awful lot of energy  
because I'm sending it back to a situation that is no more.  
I'm just sending it back to a lesson that I need to learn  
and if I can get along to learning my lesson, then perhaps I could unplug from it.

Carolyn Mace suggests that we intentionally say  
we forgive ourselves or forgive others,  
learn our lessons and unplug ourselves from that situation in the past  
and bring our energy back here to the present,  
to be fully present,  
to allow God to work through us,  
to allow us to be in that place of forgiveness  
rather than in that place where we're sending our energy continuously to the past.  
And sometimes that takes an awful lot of work,  
and sometimes that takes an awful lot of effort.  
I can do it an then 10 seconds later I have to do it again –  
we just keep working at it as best we can  
so that our energy can be in the present moment.

What helps our body cope in times of loss?  
or times when expectations have not been met?  
well one, certainly, is exercise – that helps burn off all those turbulent feelings,  
but I would also suggest that service can make a difference for us.  
Something our bodies can do even if our minds, hearts & spirits aren't ready yet.  
Our bodies can lead the way – helping us to place one foot in front of the other,  
- moving us toward the profound gift of service,  
- of giving of ourselves to help make a positive difference in the world  
whatever that is for each one of us.

A Japanese Folktale Parable titled, "The House of 1,000 Mirrors"

Long ago in a small, far away village,  
there was a place known as the House of 1,000 Mirrors.  
A small, happy little dog learned of this place and decided to visit.  
When he arrived, he bounced happily up the stairs to the doorway of the house.  
He looked through the doorway with his ears lifted high  
and his tail wagging as fast as it could.

To his great surprise,  
he found himself staring at 1,000 other happy little dogs  
with their tails wagging just as fast as his. He smiled a great smile,  
and was answered with 1,000 great smiles just as warm and friendly.  
As he left the House, he thought to himself, "This is a wonderful place.  
I will come back and visit it often."

In this same village,  
another little dog who was not quite as happy as the first one decided to visit the house.  
He slowly climbed the stairs and hung his head low as he looked in the door.  
When he saw the 1,000 unfriendly looking dogs staring back at him,  
he growled at them and was horrified to see 1,000 little dogs growling back at him.

As he left, he thought to himself,  
"This is a horrible place, and I will never go back there again."

All the faces in the world, the parable suggests, are mirrors.

Yesterday in the Saturday morning small group  
Craig Hyland – who I led the group with – shared this idea  
and gave me permission to use it today:  
He said – I love the line in the St Francis prayer  
that says it is only in dying that we are born to eternal life,  
or that we experience resurrected life.  
And he told a story that I've heard other versions of . . . .  
the story of a sculptor created an amazing sculpture of an elephant.  
He was asked – how he did he do it?  
He replied saying that all he did was carve away the parts  
that weren't part of the elephant.

Craig reflected that we need to carve away the things  
that aren't part of the essence of who we truly are . . . .  
we need to die too, to let go of  
the things in our lives that do not allow us to be fully who we are,  
- whether that's addictions or anger, or judgments of ourselves or others,  
or expectations that no longer fit  
and can in fact begin to dishonour the fullness of the people  
we put our expectations upon.

“We all have something we are recovering from,”  
is the basis of the service that happens in Brockville that is called – Celebrate Life.

As we move into the summer month of August  
may it be a time for each one of us to truly Celebrate Life.  
A time for us (or at least for me if it doesn't fit for you) to:  
- notice and be filled with gratitude for all that is beauty,  
- to acknowledge the places that we need to forgive ourselves and others  
and begin the process of releasing so our energy is free for better uses.  
May it be a time to carve away the things in our lives  
that are not part of who we are  
as ones made in the image of God.  
And may it be a time for us to spend time  
reconnecting to the divine energy of love in us, and beyond us  
- which we call God  
so that we may make room in our lives for the gentle strength of God  
to fill us with joy  
so our lives may be filled with love  
and a passion for justice.  
May it be so.

