

“Together We Can Do Amazing Things!”
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia
September 20/09

When I was first ordained,
I used to read a portion of the reading Isabella read this morning
at all the weddings that I did.
I would look at the two people being married
and I would speak these words as my prayer for that couple:
and I speak them today
- as my prayer for all of us gathered today.
And Jesus says to us - As God has loved me – so have I loved you;
abide in my love.
If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,
just as I have kept God’s commandments
and abide in God’s love . . .
I have said these things to you
- so that my joy be in you – and that your joy may be complete . . .
This is my commandment
- that you love one another as I have loved you.
At those weddings (and again today?)
I would get tingles all through me as I said those words . . .
and I remember that I would feel grounded
- aware that our roots grow deep into a story that is rich with wisdom,
a story that will nourish our lives with joy.
“This is my commandment – that you love one another as I have loved you.”
Wow - if we could all learn to love more like the stories tell us Jesus loved.
Let’s think for a moment about how Jesus loved . . .
When we read the stories of how people remember Jesus
we hear stories of a person who loved extravagantly
>who saw goodness in people that others rejected
>who saw how others were in bondage – whether to fear or social customs
- and encouraged them to consider being freed, being healed
- which could only happen if they wanted healing.
In the name of Jesus
>we hear stories of a person who savoured the gift of being in community
-where we learn and grow together:
1) as we support each other on the journey of life,
or
2) as we bump and stumble over how to be in relationship in a healthy way. . .
and through our struggle and bumps - we learn – just like Jesus’ disciples learned
- and we begin to smooth off the rough edges
- as we practice living the way of love with each other.

In the stories of Jesus we hear of a person who knew the importance of being in community
but also knew the importance of time apart from the noise and bustle
- to reconnect with the God-power within and the God-power beyond us

Listening for, reconnecting with the God-power within us.

This summer I finally took the opportunity
to read a book that people have recommended to me several times over the years
- Sue Monk Kidd's novel – "The Secret Life of Bees."
In the novel there is a statue of a black madonna that the people who were slaves went to
to help them get through the tough realities of their lives.
They would touch the heart of the black madonna statue and feel the power to cope.

There is one wonderful scene in the story when August
- whose home the black madonna is kept in - who they call "Our Lady"
- August who is a woman who is black American, speaks to Lilly
- a teenage white girl who has lived with August the beekeeper and her sisters
as Lily has been building up her strength and healing.
August said, "Listen to me now, Lily.
I'm going to tell you something I want you always to remember, all right?"
Her face had gone serious. Intent. Her eyes did not blink.
"All right," I said (which is Lily), and I felt something electric slide down my spine.
"Our Lady is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother.
She's not the statue in the parlour.
She's something inside of you. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"
"Our Lady is inside me," I repeated, not sure I did.
(August went on) "You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do.
Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside."

The idea of connecting to God within us - has woven down through our Christian story
- you hear the idea in the early Christian Church – in the stories of the mystics.
But when I went to Sunday School as a child
I was taught only about God being out there somewhere
- which was not consistent with my experiences – even as a young child.
I was taught there was a particular way to believe and a set of answers for life . . .
I felt squashed and tramped on.

In the past five decades we have transitioned into a different way of engaging with life
then the perspective I first encountered as a child.
Some identified this transition as moving from modern to post-modern times.
One of the shifts that has happened in this time
- has been a shift away from absolute answers and toward an ongoing discernment
or seeking for wisdom – which can be found through different sources
- including through our own experiences and deep within ourselves.

In the late 90's I did the closing reflections for three years of the Women's Retreat Day that was held here in Orillia with one of the organizers being Karen Wilford - a lawyer - who was part of our congregation.

At that gathering one of the phrases that I used to talk about the transition we are going through - that seemed to resonate with the people -

is that we have shifted from a time when we are satisfied or comfortable with being handed a second hand set of beliefs

- to a time when what we seek is a first hand way of knowing!

So this transition from modern to post-modern has been described (by me) as a shift from "a second hand set of beliefs to a first hand way of knowing"

- where we trust that our inner wisdom is worth listening to and we trust that in community we have wisdom amongst us.

In Diana Butler Bass' book that the Wednesday morning Learning Circle is studying and discussing right now called "Christianity For The Rest Of Us"

- Diana identifies 10 signposts that her research has found in vibrant, dynamic, life-giving congregations.

Last week I talked about the first signpost being genuine

"Hospitality and a willingness to welcome the stranger - and each other."

The second signpost that Diana has seen in the vibrant churches she has identified is "discernment" . . . a willingness to listen deep within for divine wisdom and direction

- rather than basing our choices in life on personal preference as our only guide.

She spoke of several churches who have intentionally built in opportunities for discernment that includes the support of the community for individual lives

as well as ones that provide opportunity for church communities to discern together where they see God present in their ministry

- opportunities that we also have here at St Paul's . . .

opportunities so that we - in our own individual lives and in our life together as a church - can listen for what our next steps will be on the journey of life

to answer the question - what are we beckoned to - in this time in this place?

Our overarching theme for this year is "Be Not Afraid"

- a phrase we hear strewn throughout scripture . . .

which we have paired with another often repeated phrase in our stories - "Choose Life."

When we enter into discernment,

when we are willing to listen to that wisdom deep within,

when we are willing to risk facing and moving beyond our fear,

when we are open to seeking to love and allowing joy to fill us instead of fear

- we will be changed.

In years past I remember hearing people say - why bother - why bother -

we can't change anything anyway . . .

and I have watched people with that perspective shrivel up with fear and hopelessness wrapped around them like a scratchy blanket that only brings discomfort.

And over the years I have seen people risk entering into community
where we listen to each other's stories and one another's wisdom
and find a new way – a renewed life.

I have seen it happen in small groups, through workshops and study groups
through week of guided prayer and through people being companioned by Stephen Ministers
(all the groups and opportunities at Community Fair).

I have seen people awaken to what is possible
- awaken to what it means to live the way of love
- awaken to joy and gratitude.

I have watched when we as citizens of our earth home
- have awakened because we've experienced what some have called "Blessed Unrest"
- which comes when we listen to the wisdom deep within us
- a wisdom creates the need to say

"we need to look at where we are going in this world and what we are doing to the earth" . . .

And when we have done that . . .
a new song has begun – a song that may have started quietly –
but has grown in volume . . . a song that has echoed across the centuries
& speaks of justice & beauty & joy & connectedness.

For the Toronto Conference Annual Meeting that I was worship leader for this past spring,
Rick Brown (our techie) and I created a PowerPoint that reminds us of times
when we have seen changes that we never thought we'd see
- but small groups of people found wisdom within
and then risked putting their wisdom into action that resulted in healthy – life-giving change.

While the PowerPoint plays – Blair will play John Oldham's song in the background.
"Deep in our hearts there is a common vision"
- which will be part of our prayers following the PowerPoint.