

**“Preoccupied With ... Priorities?”  
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson  
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia  
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It was the fall of 1980 when Alan and I were married  
and we began a pattern of spending ever larger chunks of time  
with my Mom and Dad on the weekends.

We had no money  
because we’d started our own business  
plus our time with Mom and Dad was fun.

About a year later  
my sister moved away from home with a partner.  
Every weekend we would invite Wendy and her partner to come back  
and share the family feast.

Week after week Wendy would say thank you but she couldn’t come...  
she had work to do ...

In my memory  
what she repeatedly said  
was that she had to clean her floors particularly her hallway ...  
and therefore she couldn’t come.

And I used to start to feel guilty about all the things left undone at our home.  
(I would often think of that joke  
built on the lines –  
you can eat off my floor they’re so clean –  
you can eat off this too - )

I remember thinking my sister’s hallway  
had to have the cleanest surface imaginable  
and I’d think about the hallways in our home –  
where you really didn’t have to worry about how clean the floor  
was because the floor was rarely seen –  
the stuff of life and activity tended to be piled up in it.

In the Fall of 1982  
I helped Wendy move out  
and leave behind a situation that had become unbearable...  
and she began sharing Sunday night family dinner with us.

I remember her commenting how good it felt ...

Then in late April 1983  
Dad had a massive heart attack –  
Wendy was there and so was my brother Mark ...

I wasn’t,  
and I didn’t get to see Dad that night that he died.

But that felt okay ...  
Wendy and Mark got to see him ...  
but because I’d seen him week after week

and had so many memories tucked into my heart –  
I was glad they had their time.  
In the next days Wendy wept in my arms at all the missed moments.

Mom reminded me the other day  
of a word she heard me use time and again  
in those days of the early 80's when Alan & I were first married,  
when I started seminary,  
when Dad died  
and when Sarah was born.  
She reminded me that often my answer to questions  
was that I would do whatever was a priority –  
and even though social customs  
might think differently about what constitutes priorities than I did –  
my priority was clear in my mind and heart ...  
and I followed that path ...  
people always come before the organization or cleaning up of stuff ...  
which often meant you'd trip over stuff in my hallway ...  
but you'd have my full attention while you did it.

As I look back over the years ...  
there are a multitude of moments  
when I have lost touch with that wisdom of the decade of my 20's.

I know I'm not alone  
in feeling like I am often preoccupied with the stuff of life  
rather than the priorities that stir deep within me.

In our gospel story today  
we hear about the wonderful metaphor of the great feast –  
a metaphor for the Kingdom of God here on earth –  
a feast that we are all invited to ...  
but...  
to often we're too busy –  
taking care of the things we think are the important things of life ...  
but are they?

Recently  
I came across a reflection on this gospel story of the great banquet  
by one of our past moderators  
in the United Church of Canada -  
Peter Short.

He wrote them in June of 2005  
when same gender marriage became legal.  
Peter had represented the National United Church of Canada

before parliament sharing why we, as a national church,  
encouraging them to vote in favour of legalizing same gender marriage  
but also was clear that it would be important for faith communities  
to choose whether or not they would perform them.

Figuring out priorities,  
figuring out whether our choices are based on faith  
on connection to our higher power  
or  
on our own preferences...  
is an important process  
but it's not always an easy process.

We can get caught up in a fast moving constant current  
that sends us barreling down the river of life  
that keeps us so busy,  
or so lulled –  
we don't think of taking Sabbath time  
rest time –  
(which would provide us with time) –  
on the shores of the river  
to figure out whether or not we are:  
travelling down the right river  
or travelling in the right part of the river  
or using the right equipment for the journey.

If we don't take that time to ponder and ruminate  
we can end up living someone else's priorities  
rather than our own.  
Rather than the ones that stir deep within our knowing  
of what will really be most life giving.

At the Wed. morning learning circle this week  
we had a good discussion  
of two more sign posts  
that Deana Butler Bass has identified  
typically being present in vital congregations that are practicing  
– what she calls –  
“Christianity for the Rest of Us”  
Christianity that is not literal  
or fundamentalist,  
that does not give absolute answers –  
but rather understands Christianity  
as a journey of living with the questions –  
so churches that create community  
that is supportive and honouring of the journey.

In the two chapters we discussed this week,  
“healing” and “contemplation”  
were identified as sign posts of these healthy post modern churches.

In the examples given  
there was a model shared that caught the attention of some of the group.  
The model comes from a congregation that seeks to live a very balanced life  
that encourages time for contemplation –  
it is a 3 structures model  
of sanctuary – home – closet.

Sanctuary  
is the time together with the wider community  
for nourishment through stories  
and singing and praying together and feasting.

Home  
refers to intentional time in small groups  
where intimate community is created  
allowing in depth conversation and sharing.

Closet  
refers to ensuring that you set time aside  
for personal contemplation on a regular basis.

This combination of sanctuary – home – closet  
provides opportunity for developing our capacity to listen  
to when things feel like the right choice –  
feel like they are connected to that place of center  
within and flow out from there.

The combination of making time  
for “Sanctuary – Home – Closet”  
ensures that we have the chance  
to practice identifying when we feel aligned with our higher self –  
not that we’re going to feel aligned  
with our higher self in every moment  
that we are in sanctuary – home or closet ...  
but when we set aside times  
that allow for the possibility of contemplation –  
then we begin to glimpse what it feels like to be aligned –  
if only in brief moments ...  
which helps us in the midst of everyday life  
to recognize when we do,  
and when we don’t, feel aligned to our higher self –  
to our higher power.