



LESSONS for LIFE

JANUARY 13, 2008 11:00 a.m.

RSVP MONTH

'S' STEWARDSHIP

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: ECCLESIASTES 5: 18 - 20

Gospel: MARK 12: 41 – 44

I'm going to ask for your extra help this morning for the sermon. This is the annual stewardship sermon and as I prepared it leading up to this week it seemed rather dry and dull and not exactly what it needed to be, but nothing else was coming. So I kept praying and wondering and trying to figure out what could make this sermon better. So last night, before I went to bed, I prayed and I said, *God, I need some inspiration*. I've heard people say that if you pray before you go to bed and you ask for something before you go to bed at night then often some idea or inspiration will come to you during the night. So I prayed, *God, give me some inspiration*. And so, I had a dream last night and when I woke up at the end of the dream I said, *that's it*. But that was in the middle of the night – last night – and so there's not been a lot of time to work and refine this, so here it is. If you like it, tell me. If you don't – tell God!

I would like you to imagine another world, a different world; a world that's full of Teddy bears where those Teddy bears are alive where they live and move and interact with each other. There are lots of Teddy bears in that world that are very colourful, having lots of fun playing with other Teddy bears, forming community and families and friends. Yet in this Teddy bear world there are also lots of invisible Teddy bears who are not able to relate to and interact with and play with other Teddy bears. They can see everything but they're not seen. They're invisible. And so they live with that sadness of being able to see what is possible while at the same time not participating in what's possible; and some of those Teddy bears are made invisible by other people and some choose that invisibility themselves. Some are invisible because they are of a minority race where the majority does not value them and looks past them and beyond them and so they feel at times invisible. In other cases they may be different and have a disability and not be able to participate because society has not made it easier or helped in their participation and so they feel invisible. In some cases they have chosen invisibility out of fear because of what they have heard or experienced around them and so they choose to be invisible so that they won't be hurt. Some of those bears are invisible because they fear for their lives because of what they've seen or heard from others.

And so those bears that are invisible because of a disability – these are some of my bears (holding up an assortment of small Teddy bears). This does NOT mean I want you to start giving me more Teddy bears okay. Enough! This is a bear that has only one eye because we have two dogs and one of them was jealous of this Teddy bear and so took an eye out! But some of the bears experience invisibility because of a disability. And some bears, because of their invisibility decide to get very very busy and keep themselves busy in order to avoid the pain, and so they immerse themselves in education as they work hard on working on degrees and education just to keep busy to avoid the pain. Others of them decide to get very busy in church things and get very busy in spiritual communities trying to experience acceptance and holiness and inclusiveness in those faith communities. Others of them experience invisibility because of who they love and because of who they love and have experienced that it is not acceptable in some places, they choose to be invisible in order not to



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be hurt; but that invisibility means that they cannot love and express that love and receive love. Some of them fall in love with bears similar to them and are able to find those relationships but even in the midst of those relationships have to hide and pretend and choose invisibility. Some of those bears go to church. Some of them go to churches where it's very easy to sleep during sermons. Others of them leave their faith communities more afraid afterwards because of what was said than they were when they entered the building.

Then God called another church into being. God called this church into being to make sure that all who wanted to could come; this church was called to challenge people to celebrate who they are: to accept their differences and their diversity and to honour that. This church was calling people to be fully visible and not choose invisibility. This church was meant to be a place where people could play well with others and to be able to experience that kind of acceptance and fun. However, God decided to challenge this church to move to its next step: that there were still Teddy bears outside of that community who did not know that it existed or that they were welcome. God called this church to move outside of its own wonderful, wonderful space. Now the difficulty was that the space – the community was so great and it was so good there that it was difficult to let go of some of that. It was difficult to give that away and yet God kept saying *It is more blessed to give than to receive* and the reality is that as the church was courageous and willing to step outside the safety of its own place and to reach out to others that the church didn't lose anything at all. And God was challenging that church to take the next step and to confront the various forms of invisibility; to lift up people's self-esteem so that they would choose with courage their own visibility. To confront hateful religion that scared people into invisibility. To confront discrimination of its various kinds and forms so that people could be visible and celebrated for who they are. But in order for that church to take that next step there had to be a commitment on behalf of the church to do it, and then there had to be a commitment on the part of individual members of that church to move beyond where they were and to be committed to being more and to doing more.

This is the 35th year of MCC Toronto and our theme for this year is celebrating our past, securing our future. It could also have been celebrating our past and sharing our future. This month is RSVP month and this Sunday is Stewardship Sunday. Last week I announced four initiatives that the Board of Directors are including in our budget this year:

1. Money to promote the existence of this church. Other than Christmas Eve and Pride we don't spend one penny reaching out to people beyond this church and letting them know we exist and so the Board has made a commitment this year to do that.
2. Additionally, the Board has decided to set aside 2% of our offerings so that two cents of every dollar that you give will go to support MCC churches in Canada, either to strengthen them or to establish new ones; and
3. An additional 2% as well to support establishing an MCC church in Poland. Our denomination has come to us and asked us to respond to the interest in Poland and to establish a church there and so 2% of every dollar will go to that.
4. The Board has decided that we will hire an additional staff person over and above our present staff complement – so we're not going to cut any staff to do this – to hire an Executive Director to run the day to day operations of the church.

Last Sunday I explained how important that was for us as a congregation – to have that capacity and to have those skills to go beyond where we are now; and I also got a little bit personal in explaining how important that



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was for me in terms of being able to let go of some stuff and to do the things the Board wants me to do and that, frankly, I'm on the verge of just not being able to do any more and something has to change; and I'm so grateful to Brian and the Board of Directors and to John and Anne who did the study and to the rest of the Board that took the step and courage to do that.

All four of these initiatives are exciting and wonderful and what it means though for us is that it is a stretched year. This means a challenge for us financially. Instead of just being comfortable and cautious we've taken a step, a huge step in faith this year. As we look back and celebrate our past there have been generousities extended over the years that have been amazing. The John Pierre Parrot estate made it possible for us to establish our Aids Care Community Care Ministry. The gift that Lloyd (Simmons) and Bruce (Walker) gave in terms of our Christmas Eve services. The late Pat Fletcher – when we didn't have a place to worship back in 1977 – the Unitarians extended an invitation for us to worship there – but we didn't have enough money to pay the first month's rent and Pat got out her cheque book and made out a cheque and made it possible for us. The renovations to our first 24 hour a day 7 days a week facility – the southern wing of Bathurst Street United church. The sponsor for our Open Freedom event this past year. So many campaigns, so many offerings; so many times when we made it – but just – and it was every five dollars or ten dollars or a large gift that made it possible.

In the scripture reading this morning Jesus talked about the widow who was there who gave – and her giving was noticed and he used it as an example to talk about giving sacrificially and how important the little gifts and the big gifts are. So we have some key parts of our giving that really are the foundation: the sustained givers, those who give on a regular basis, and the people who have included the church in their Wills and Estates. When I approached Douglas Elliott to talk about wills and estates and planned giving he said, "Brent, I don't understand why you're doing that." Now I thought surely Douglas would understand the importance of this, so I said, "What do you mean, Douglas, why?" And he said, "Well, I thought your intention was for me to die poor, to give everything while I'm alive." The importance of wills and estates. There are four challenges facing us in this area. The first is my past. I was raised in a strict fundamentalist tradition: guilt-based giving is my tradition; and it's very hard for me to move past that and to celebrate an abundance mentality; to celebrate a generous generosity mentality and so I always find it hard to communicate around giving. Secondly, one of the challenges facing us is that every time we raise the word money or financial giving we get a number of folks who get quite angry at us and say, "All you ever talk about is money and you should stop talking about money." And yet the reality is that if we don't talk about resources that are needed from volunteerism to facilities to finances then we would not have the resources to move forward. Thirdly, most of the regular attendees of this church – not all but most – don't have adult church experience. They were not involved in other churches as adults and so they are not as aware of how much it costs to run a church. And finally, the challenge we face is there is so much we want to do. So many more things that we want to accomplish together! And so, as we secure our future financially it will be very much dependent upon your giving, both now on a regular basis and through your estate planning. So, this morning in your order of service there were two forms: one is a volunteer form where you can indicate your intentions or your desire to help as a volunteer; and the second is the financial contribution form which you can take a look at and decide whether you want to increase your giving this year because of these new initiatives and to help us with it, or if you've never before made a pledge to become a sustainer, then those opportunities are on these forms and we encourage you to complete them today or in the next couple of weeks as we continue this RSVP month together.

We are very responsible stewards of the financial gifts you entrust to our care. Pragmatic budgeting, regular financial reports and an annual external audit done of our books. We can do so much more, but the reality is I can't and the staff can't. We need you, we need your support so that we can move beyond what we're



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currently doing. Now, because of my background I'm a tither. I give ten percent of my income off the top to the church; and yet last year at this time I shared with you that I no longer believe in that Biblical command to tithe. Now those of you who tithe, like me, this is not an invitation to cut back; but what I said is the changing situation in society, the changing role in society has meant that I believe that it is fair for a number of us to make your financial contributions to other organizations as well; that there are other organizations in which you place your financial commitments and to recognize that; and to suggest to folks that you give five percent to other charities and five percent to the church and the way that works out – a little formula that works – is that it is one dollar per Sunday for every thousand dollars per year that you make. So if your annual salary is \$25,000. a year that's \$25.00 a Sunday, that's 5%.

A few weeks ago you may have been here when we had our "Mitten" Sunday and if you were here you know how good that felt for us to be able to give and respond in that way. That's what giving is meant to be: not out of obligation or command but an opportunity to participate to help and to make the world a better place and to feel good about doing so. In a few moments you are going to hear the offering song and that song opens with a paragraph which says, *If you could see all the people, they're every one I ever was and every one I ever will be.* When I read that this week my first thought was, *I don't want to see all the people. I don't want to see all the poverty, all the children and the elderly who are at grave disadvantage because of economic situations. I don't want to see all the people who are in pain because of an illness or separation. I don't want to see all the LGB people around the world who are living in fear. It would be too overwhelming.* And then I thought, yes, we need to see and we need to know and we need to respond – doing what we can where we can with what we have and doing our best in the way that we can to respond. The offertory song ends with these words: *And if you see all the people they're every one I ever was and every one I ever will be – all the lives of me.* We are our sisters' and our brothers' keeper. We are responsible for those people around the world who are living invisible lives because of racism or because of poverty or because of homophobia or sexism. We are responsible for each other. And so, God called a church – God called you.

Amen.