



LESSONS for LIFE

Sunday, January 20, 2008-11am

Lessons for Life

R.S.V.P Series

V: Volunteering

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: ROMANS 12: 3-8

Gospel: LUKE 10: 1, 2

This month we have called RSVP month. We believe that we have been given a phenomenal invitation to be apart of what is happening at MCC Toronto but that we need more folks to RSVP their response. And so, on each Sunday we have been taking a look at each letter in RSVP. The first Sunday was R for recognizing our past and the great things that have happened and recognizing our potential, what we could be together. Last Sunday, S, stood for Stewardship where we all weathered through the annual stewardship sermon and I think we all survived that experience. And we talked about the importance of financial commitment and this Sunday is "V" standing for volunteering. I could do the typical volunteer sermon. I could draw on the scripture that talked about we are all members of one body together with different gifts and different skills and how important it is for all of us to bring those skills. I could talk about the need, the obvious need for more of who we are and what we are in the world. I could talk about obligation: the scripture that says to us we are our sisters' and brothers' keeper, that we have a responsibility for the person across the street or across the globe, for people who are in need. We are responsible for each other. Or I could talk about the wonderful opportunity that arises from volunteering and the blessing of caring for and reaching out and supporting others and how we receive more than we give. Recently someone shared with me three words that she pulls forth when things are challenging around work or volunteerism. She talked about the reminding of when you are choosing an area or even experiencing a challenge in an area to take a look at these three words to make sure that its choiceful your decision, that you choose what you do based on something that you feel is the right choice for you. Secondly, that you are capable; that you choose an area where you feel you have something to give and something from your training or your past that would support that choice. And thirdly that you take a look at connectedness. Does it really connect with who you are and give you an opportunity to connect with others?

So those are all the things that I could have done but what I am choosing to do this morning is to get a bit more personal than that because I think we all know that volunteering is important. I think we all know that all organizations, churches or others, rely on volunteers to be the core of what they do. I think we all know here at MCC Toronto that volunteering is crucial to our future. There is a core of volunteers here who are unbelievably committed and dedicated, many of whom carry twp or three volunteer loads. So this morning the sermon is really not geared



LESSONS for LIFE

towards those of you who have already responded. The sermon this morning is geared towards the vast majority of folks who have yet to make that commitment or make that decision that this place or even another volunteer place is crucial and that calls for a response. So I want to talk about me this morning. Now I do want to clarify that I am not a volunteer in the purest sense of the word. The church pays me a very, very good salary and so in that sense I am not a volunteer but most of the staff of our church certainly volunteer beyond their job. I want to try to answer the question this morning that a number of you over the years have asked me about why is it that I've continued to be a part of this church, why is it that I continue to do what I do? More directly, I want to answer the question this morning, why have I chosen to give my life to this church? Except for three years of teaching high school in Nova Scotia a long time ago and except for one year of being an underwriter for an insurance company during my first year here in Toronto most of my adult life has been involved in being here. And so why have I chosen to do that? Certainly I love this church. I love what we've accomplished and I am ecstatic about our potential. You may not be aware though that as in any situation I think staff of our church present and past would say that there are joyful moments and there are very challenging moments, and that has been true for me. In those challenging moments I have tended to put on some extra layers of protection. Sometimes it's been as simple, in a sense, as a bulletproof vest when there has been a threat, very seldom has that been the case though. But more often it has been other kinds of layers. Maybe I have been rushing from one meeting to another and you've wanted to speak with me and in my rushing I may have been abrupt or brushed you off too quickly. Maybe you've had a concern and internally I've judged it as petty when there have been other concerns that I have judged to be more important and so have therefore not paid attention to the kind of concerns that you've had and that you've raised. And so I think that because of different circumstances sometimes those layers have been put on in the challenging times.

However, this morning I want to share with you why I do this and I want to invite you on that journey too. Why is it I'm today going to push volunteering? And why is it today as a part of this month we are pushing financial contributions, wanting you to RSVP? Instead I could be preaching a warm fuzzy kind of sermon that would give us all that inner lovey dovey feeling that's more popular. So this morning I want to talk to you about 5 reasons why I have chosen so far to give my life to this church and why I really hope that I have the amazing opportunity to continue to do that until I retire. First of all, I believe that spirituality is very, very important, not because God needs us to be Holy or because God needs us to adore God or to worship God, not that at all. I believe spirituality is very important because we need it. I believe that a strong and deep spirituality is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves and one of the greatest gifts we can offer to others. And I believe that people are searching for a strong and deep spirituality, the kind of spirituality that can bring strength when times get tough, that can bring hope when you are ready to give up, that can bring confidence to take risks at work or in the community or in relationships; to deepen those experiences; the kind of spirituality that can cause you to persevere and hang in, the kind of spirituality that brings healing of the hurts and the pains and the illness. And so I believe that spirituality is important enough that we should want to give to others and give others the opportunity to do deep in their faith, to have their questions not only honoured but answered with each other, gathering wisdom from within and around. Secondly, I do this because I believe the Christian Church today needs rescuing in the same way that the faith communities of Jesus' time needed rescuing. I believe that we all lose if the face of Christianity becomes a fundamentalist face. I believe when the Church is at its best that it is a wonderful, wonderful gift to society: helping its congregants to be more generous and



LESSONS for LIFE

more courageous, to live by important values. And I believe that a progressive, vibrant face of Christianity needs to be offered to the world. I believe the kind of Christian church that we are becoming is the kind of church that people will respond to and want to be a part of and where they will be honoured, again, with their questions and their concerns and where we can struggle with those together. And so I think MCC Toronto is uniquely placed to be a new kind of Christian church in offering that to others. Thirdly, Alanna sang this morning and the song that she sang, I believe, is the same song that she sang so powerfully 7 years ago on January the 14th, 2001 at our 11 o'clock service. And it was a service just before the weddings that day when there was great tension around security issues. There was great excitement about the weddings and we were kind of coasting through the 9 o'clock and the 11 o'clock service in anticipation of those weddings, when at the 11 o'clock service a woman came forward and starting to yell and to scream and I did what every security person tells me not to do and I walked over to her to ask her to calm down and to stop to disrupting the service and she shoved me and that kind of shocked all of us, frankly, and it sent this amazing chill through the congregation and shortly after that happened Alanna got up to sing the offertory and she redeemed the moment. She sang, "the dark night is over" and it was amazing, amazing encouragement for us to hang in and to keep going. And yet, that dark night is not over for so many GLBT people around the world. There are still so many folks who don't experience what we experience here in this church or in this country; so many people who live in absolute terror and fear. I remember being in high school and falling in love, falling in love with another student in my class who never knew, who couldn't know. I was terrified that it would show so I would avoid him at every event, every school activity just so I wouldn't let a look or a word slip and I realize how insignificant that is compared with what many people live with today around the world. We have a responsibility for those folks. So I believe that because most of the opposition to human rights for GLBT people is religious based, I believe that this church is called to do more and that this church is one of the best vehicles for combating that terror and that discrimination around the world. Look at what we've accomplished here in Canada and what this church has been doing as part of the significant progress in this country because we have taken on the religious right. A religious attack requires a religious response. And again and again this church has been there for that in this country and I believe we are now being called to do that more internationally. Fourthly, I believe in the message that Jesus came 2000 years ago to share. I believe that what He said then is as needed today as it was then, that His message about love and not vengeance, His message about forgiveness and not hatred, His message to be a love based church and not a rules based church, His message about joy and not hopelessness, His message about peace and not anxiety or fear or worry. I believe in that message and I believe that that message needs to get out and unfortunately much of what Christianity has done has made that message almost un-hearable for most people. They have so quickly dismissed the messages of Jesus because of the messages of the Church. And I believe in that message and I believe to proclaim that message again and again to our world. So spirituality is important and I believe we have an opportunity to share that and to reconnect people spiritually; that the Christian church needs rescuing and we have an opportunity to be a different kind of church; that human rights are crucially important around the world and we need to be there to be responding. And I believe that the message of Jesus needs to be proclaimed and lived and shared and that it will transform individuals and our world. But there is a fifth reason. As a young teenager I believe Jesus said to me, "come and follow me and I will make you fishers of souls." And I kept saying, "Yes but... Yes but..." I know I am no Martin Luther King. I know I am no Moses and I know I am no Jesus. I do know that even the brilliance of the dream and the vision and the sermons of



LESSONS for LIFE

Martin Luther King would not have been enough if there weren't people to stand up with him, to march with him, to risk with him. And I know that Moses would have looked kind of silly walking through that desert and across the Red Sea by himself if there weren't people ready to walk out of slavery into freedom, to risk leaving the familiar behind to walk into the new future. And I know that Jesus would not have been able to accomplish what he accomplished if there hadn't been disciples who were willing to follow, who were willing to risk, who were willing to leave their fishing nets behind. So this morning I ask you to join in this journey. I know that this is an amazing church and that worship is usually a very wonderful experience and that it helps and inspires. And I also know that we need to move beyond just consuming the religion or the spirituality of this place and that we need more of you to take the step out of the pew into commitment and involvement in our church. And I know that as you do there will be struggles and challenges. There will be temptations to give up. Martin Luther King once said this; "We have so much strength in us. After a while at a certain point we are so weak and worn we hoist up the flag of surrender. Whatever we say and think, this arduous duty, doing this kind of work to live out ones idealism brings with it hazards." But I say to you this morning, the hazards are nothing in comparison to the gift that we get when we become a gift to others. I say to you this morning that the blessings of service in this place or in other places, but in some place, making that commitment will change who you are and collectively will change who the world is so that more people will be able to experience the dark night being over and a new day coming. The world needs us; the world needs more of us.

Amen.