



LESSONS for LIFE

Sunday April 20, 2008 **Just Imagine – 1980 to the present PART 1** **Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.**

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: 1 Peter 2: 2-10

Gospel: John 14: 1-3

Today we are in the midst of Passover. Passover a very Holy Jewish occasion also celebrated and recognized in much of Christianity. This morning in the sermon at 9:00, I forewarned the congregation by saying that I am in a very “sucky” space this morning for a variety of reasons some you have already heard and the content of the sermon and more I will share with you at communion time. Passover is meant as a time of reflection, it is meant as a time to look back on your life and on your journey, a time to look back through history, on the lessons from history. Passover is also a time to celebrate the movement from slavery to freedom, the historical movements and also your own personal movement. For Passover invites you to re-live the story of the Exodus; it invites you to begin your own journey from slavery to freedom in whatever forms or institutions you might be experiencing that personal slavery. Passover was a very key moment in the history of the people of Israel and it invites each one of us to take that first step, that scary first step out of what is comfortable even though it may be unhealthy, out of that comfortable place into full freedom in front of us. Passover is like a fork in the road, where you have a decision to make and that decision might be between what is comfortable, unhealthy, stagnant, and between that which is a risk, maybe even danger, but the way that you know is best for you and for those who will come after us. Passover was a key reference point, a key reminder. We will relive it tomorrow night at our Sader supper that you are invited to be a part of.

So as we take a look at Passover and its meaning for reflection and looking back and as this year is the thirty fifth anniversary of our church, I thought I would take some time this morning to look back at some of the key moments in the life of this congregation. This morning will be part one and this evening will be part two. I will bring us part way through the history this morning and then complete it this evening and we invite you back for that, if you like.

So, we have been on this journey as a congregation and at a number of times we have also faced the fork in the road. A time to make decisions to either move forward in the risky places or stay

in the comfortable places and at almost all of those forks in the road, there were both voices...there were people saying, "Let's not do this, let's not go there...let's remain where we are. So this morning you are going to have to just imagine what it was like, back then, as I relive some of the moments. Jesus said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled, be not afraid. Believe or trust in God, believe and trust in Me," He said. Many times that fork in the road has been for us and may now be for you, a time of nervousness and anxiety, but please know that for every decision Jesus says, "Do not let your heart be troubled, trust in God, trust also in me."

During these years there has been a scripture that is one of my favorites. So in time of challenge or special historical moments I have often pulled it out and used it as the basis for my sermons. That reading was the one that was read for you this morning Peter 1: 2-10. So in preparation for this sermon I went through my sermon files, and I save all my sermons, ... I can't believe that you sat through some of them, when I reread them, (Laughter) but anyway, I went through my sermons and I pulled out all of the ones for Peter 1 chapter 2. It is amazing how many times that scripture has been there for us in these moments. In 1980, twenty-eight years ago today, on April the 20th, it was the first Sunday service, for our newly formed Church in London, Ontario. I had gone down for many months to meet with them to plan with them to plant a church there. On April the 20th, 1980 was the first Sunday service. That Sunday I began to talk about the founding of our denomination and how the Reverend Troy Perry, who was a Pentecostal minister, was kicked out of his denomination because he was gay. And how he felt God's call to start a congregation, to start a church where GLBT folks our families, our friends could meet together, and worship together. He thought it was going to be one church in Los Angeles. But as people from all over North America in particular, and the world started to travel to Los Angeles to attend the church, they wanted an MCC Church in their town, in their city in their country. So from Los Angeles MCC expanded to Miami and to Chicago and to London, England and to Toronto, Ontario. In 1973 a letter was sent from Toronto to Los Angeles asking for an MCC here. A petition with 30 some names accompanied that letter on it. The folks in Los Angeles at the head office were excited. Here there were thirty people in Toronto ready for an MCC, a great core to start the church. They didn't realize that those names on the petition were gathered on a Saturday afternoon at the Parkside Tavern.... (Laughter) The folks who were organizing MCC went to the Parkside on a Saturday afternoon with that kind of captive audience and said, "Don't you think it'd be a great idea to have a MCC?" "Well sign the petition!"

So Bob was given a one-way plane ticket and sent to Toronto to meet these thirty individuals. Three people met him at the airport and they began MCC Toronto. The first worship service was held in an office over a bar. The bar was called the 511 at Yonge Street and Alexander Street; upstairs there was an office and that was where the first service was held. So the foundation for MCC Toronto was laid. As part of our international denomination, we have over two hundred churches in some twenty-eight countries around the world. We are a part of a much larger and broader movement.

Just imagine what it was like, back in 1973 when the church first started in Toronto. Imagine what it was like in 1980 in that first Sunday Service in London, Ontario. ... How afraid people were, so afraid that at one point MCC Toronto moved and the Board of Directors was meeting and they were going to pass a motion that we not advertise our new location. Some Board members were afraid that people would see them going into the church and that might jeopardize

their jobs. Just imagine. The movement out of slavery into freedom, that movement is not always a straight line. The people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Many times on the journey to freedom there are ups and downs and curves along the way. There are amazing victories and there are deep, deep disappointments. So, if you begin that journey for yourself today, know that there will be challenges along the way.

Then, the next time I noticed I used that scripture, was in 1991. On November the 10th, that year when we dedicated this building, our new church home. This building was built in 1889, as a Methodist Church, joined the United Church in the 1920's, began to decline in its attendance in the 1950's and when we purchased the building in 1991, there was a very small congregation worshipping here. Most of the building had been closed off because they could not afford to keep it heated and the upkeep. Many parts that were still open had deteriorated substantially. Our journey to this place was a long one. As I said, in 1973 it began with worship services in an office over a bar. We were then able to get worship service space at Holy Trinity Anglican Church and were there for a while until the building was damaged by fire and the Archbishop of the time really didn't want us back and placed a number of obstacles in the way of our return. So we worshiped at the CHAT Hall that summer, the Community Homophile Association of Toronto. I say Chat Hall, it really was the chat bar and every Sunday we would go in and wash the tables off, put the beer bottles away, empty the ashtrays, try to air out the room, light a few candles to try to create a little bit more of an atmosphere. In that year 1977 the church worshiped in five different locations under four different pastors... a time of transition. When I became the pastor in August of that year, we moved to the Unitarian Church and we had a wonderful partnership with the Unitarians until we moved into the Bathurst Street United Church. Then we started looking for our own church home. It was a difficult look because at the time, neither the Roman Catholics nor the Anglicans would sell to us. They had an agreement to only sell to each other. We heard of a Parkdale Church that was for sale, a Baptist Church so we went on a tour. The pastor took us around on a tour of the building, it had been up for sale for quite a while and then all of a sudden during the tour, it clicked who we were...I guess my butch walk didn't last throughout the whole tour... but ... (Laughter)... Anyway, somehow it clicked who we were and he turned around to me and said, "I will burn this building down before I sell it to you."... So, we didn't put in an offer, (Laughter) for that church. We entertained buying some other churches a United Church in particular and were really cheated out of buying that church and even had to threaten legal action to get them to consider our offer. So, it was a difficult time trying to find our first church home. Then in 1985 we purchased 2029 Gerrard Street, our very first church home. It was an amazing time for us to have our own place, our own home. But during that time and the eventual purchase of this building, there were many, ... when we purchased the first place we had no money in the bank. We put down an offer for a down payment that we didn't have the money and we have to scramble and work hard to raise the down payment and we just made it. There were many months when we didn't have the money to pay the mortgage payment until the last day of the month, but it always seemed to come together. Wandering in the wilderness.

The next time I noticed that I used that scripture; once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God, was on May the 5th, 1996. That day the sermon was on family values. I had just returned from Ottawa being part of a debate to include sexual orientation in the Canadian Human Rights Act. It was just after the Bill 167 was defeated in the Legislature. It was just before Pride

Day when the Police insisted because of the death threats that you buy me a bulletproof vest. Most churches are used to their congregations buying their clergy vestments, you have done that too, but thank you for buying me that vest. Because of the death threats that year I called my family the night before that Pride Day service. I said to my sister Nancy, if anything should happen, please make sure that you tell my family that I love them. Because of the threats we informed you the Sunday before, we thought that you should have the opportunity to make the decision if you wanted to come to the service or not. It was in the newspapers as well. So when we got there, the police had the bomb-sniffing dogs go through the Maple Leaf Gardens and search the whole place. There were protesters outside. When the doors were opened we didn't know if anyone would come. ... When the doors were opened you flooded in and showed up for that service. Once you were not a people now you are the people of God.

The struggle during that time was to have our relationships recognized, for GLBT couples were at risk of losing their children if the birth parent died. No recognition, no protection. GLBT couples had no right to visit their partner in the hospital and there were numerous cases where partners would be together for many years, one would get ill and the other one would not be able to get in to see them.

Tonight I want to continue this journey and the stories to talk about the last few years. Passover ...it is a time to look back, a time to reflect on the journey from slavery to freedom. There are many who have gone, there are many who have passed away, but there are those folks here today who were part of building this church, part of making those decisions even tough decisions, part of wrestling with those voices who said let's not take that step, let's not protest this time, let's not move again. So, today I want to pay tribute to Boards of Directors present and past, staff people present and past, deacons present and past, leaders of our church – in a variety of forms defining that very, very broadly, team leaders, event leaders present and past. I would like all of you who fill that description present or past to please rise and stay standing for a moment or two, please. Congregation, these are the folks who have made the decision who paid the price, these are the folks who have lead us to where we are today. These are the folks who have given you the gift of MMC Toronto. These are the folks who say; we were not a people, now we are the people of God. (Applause).

Amen.