



LESSONS for LIFE

February 22, 2009 11:00am and 7:00pm

THE BUSINESS OF GOD

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: EZEKIEL 34: 11 - 13

Gospel: MATTHEW 25: 34 – 40

So, why don't you just mind your own business. Have you ever had anyone say that to you? I've had that said to me a few times over the years but that begs the question – what is your business? If I asked you that question, what is your business? You might answer something about your occupation. I would say to you that that is only a very small part of what is your business. For people of faith our business is to do the business of God. That's why you're here: to do the business of God. So what is that business that we are to carry on? The business of God that we are to carry on in our occupations or places of work, so that what you do is not just what the company expects but you are there also to do the business of God, and sometimes that puts you in conflict. To do the business of God in your social life, enjoying and celebrating friendships and relationships, but there also you're to do the business of God and sometimes that might put you in a conflict. So what has God been up to? What is the business of God?

First of all we'll take a look at our sacred scriptures and way back in time to get a sense of what God has been up to. We see that from the very beginning God was up to creating something out of nothing. God has consistently – through examples of nature – been up to transformation and change; so in those times when you're in that 'stuck' place and see no way out, remember the business of God is to create something out of nothing. When you're stuck in those places where you don't want to take on something new, when you're resisting something new even though it might be good, remember that God is in the business of transformation, of constant change. ...So to carry on the business of God means to be embracing transformation and change in our lives.

Secondly, God is up to reaching out to loss. Now, from my Baptist background that's a loaded phrase. From my Baptist background that means going out and trying to 'save' all kinds of folk from the damnation of hell who aren't Christians. From my Baptist background that would mean people from the United Church, the Catholic Church and any other church. From my Baptist background that was how it was; however, I have come to understand what that means because if you look to the life and the teachings of Jesus, when He talked about reaching out to loss he was talking about reaching out to those people who were hungry or thirsty or in prison or who needed a home. Jesus, when reaching out to loss, was talking about reaching out to people who'd given up hope, who were stuck in hopelessness or stuck in depression; reaching out to those who were lost meant reaching out to people in the midst of their challenges who needed help. I cannot imagine what it must be like to a single parent living in a job that's okay to try to raise a child or two in this society serving us by being a parent; serving us by raising the next generation and yet not having the supports that are there. That's our job, to reach out to those who are lost and need help in the midst of the challenges that they face.



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Reaching out to the loss means reaching out to people who have no spiritual connection, who've given up on spirituality, who've given up on God because of the church and religion. How can we reach out and show that there's an alternative; reaching out to those who've lost their world compass – not in a judgmental kind of way. How can we reach out? To reach out and to remind each other that we are stewards, that God's business is not ownership – and it's clear in scripture – we don't own what we have. Truly, you own nothing, nothing. Everything that we have has been entrusted to our care and we are stewards of those things. We are stewards of our homes and bank accounts and kitchens and relationships and families. They are entrusted to our care. God is in the business of being steward and caring for those resources.

Thirdly, God is in the business of loving and loving unconditionally and that's our business. That's the business we are really in; continuing to love people even when they disappoint us, even when they betray us, how can we continue to love and forgive? That's the business of God that we are called to do. And as we have seen from the scripture this morning, God is in the business of creating safe space. God has said He will continue to reach out even in the most difficult of days and I will bring them into their own land, creating safe space. So how do we create safe space? How do you create safe space at work or at your job? What about people who don't quite fit in? How do you create safe space for them? How do we create safe space for people here at our church for people who have different spiritual experiences or spiritual expressions? How do we create safe space for people who may be on a different part of their journey spiritually? This month, the BEAT team, the Black Education Awareness Team has led us in some reflections in a variety of ways on inclusion and diversity and I want to hold up this morning two additional issues around diversity, both of which have some joys and frankly, some challenges, and I think we need to be honest about it. First, my house shall be a house of prayer for all people. We are increasingly seeing children coming to be part of this faith community and there are tremendous joys and challenges with that change. The challenges come around to make sure we're not just welcoming children here but that we have programs for the kids and I'm so thankful for the folks. They're downstairs, but if some of you can pass it on we're really blessed and thankful for the folks who have created our children's church – and for the babysitting service. Thank you, thank you for your hard work and persistence. How do we make it a safe place to make sure that we don't just provide nursery or child care during the worship services but if we're asking more and more families to participate in more and more events, how can we provide child care for those events so more families are welcome? How do we provide programming when they grow past that stage when Sunday School is no longer interesting, or when they say it is no longer interesting. Can we create new programming that is still a place in a programming sense? Part of the challenge, frankly and honestly, is around the issue of disruption and noise. Many of us come to this place without having had the experience of children in our lives and so we get irritated when there is a child near us when they make noise or create a ruckus and it bothers us and it's hard to worship and we've experienced that. And frankly – when I preach – although I sometimes have some notes, I preach from points and so I rely a lot on getting away from notes because you've told me that the more I get away from that the better I am when preaching – and sometimes I get distracted, and so how do we get away from this? How can we say that this is a house of prayer for all people without welcoming children and welcoming families and sometimes families aren't ready yet to send their kids to nursery or Sunday school where they can learn and have fun. Sometimes they stay and worship with us and sometimes those kids make a ruckus and it's challenging. The joy of having children here is seeing those children raised with values and principles. The joy of being a family friendly church; the joy of the energy that is brought to this place; the joy of all of us having the joy of becoming an uncle or an aunt to those kids. We may never have the kids but they can be our family and we can adopt them as part of the family of this place.



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What about the people having physical or intellectual ability differences? Can they be welcomed in this place? The joys and the challenges. How can we be sure to be inclusive? What are the things we have to change? How can we be sure that the people have access? What are the things we have to change? How can we examine our perceptions and language and listen? How can we be sure that programming is accepting and inclusive? The joys of seeing past the differences and celebrating the diversity, the raising of our consciousness, the different perspectives that are seen, the different abilities that are expressed – gifts given to us. And this morning, I've asked permission to share a bit of a story. Sheri – you may know from hearing her sing. She's sung here before – and on one occasion – very very pregnant and another time not so. I asked Sheri to share her story and to clarify I had permission and she was very gracious. When she found out that she was pregnant with Mitie (sic), Quinn had just turned one, Kelly, her husband was working a lot at Toronto Police Services and when Sheri first took a look at that stick and took a look at that sign it was a very positive sign and she started moaning. Kelly was in another room and let out a cheer and Sheri crept back into bed to have a nap! She could not imagine juggling two small children in Toronto. She reached out to midwives, a group of women she had been with before who were the most trusted, positive and loving group of women she'd ever met and she reached out to them for help and support. Her first ultra-sound that occurred into the pregnancy indicated that the baby was eight weeks; the next ultra-sound was scheduled at the twelve week point and this was an ultra sound they decided they weren't going to have because it was an ultra sound that took a look at any possible genetic abnormalities and they had decided that no matter what that might be they were going to continue into the pregnancy and they didn't need to know that. But circumstances had it that when Sheri showed up for the appointment she was told that was what it was for and, pretty confident that everything was okay, they went ahead with that test. And Sheri writes that she didn't see anything wrong at first when the technician brought in the results and asked the supervisor to re-measure the baby, nor did any bells go off when she was told the results would be sent on to her midwife so they could decide together how to report those results. The following Monday the midwife called to say there were some abnormalities and there was a possible genetic condition. So the folks at Mount Sinai hospital who Sheri describes as true heroes were there to advise and to give information. Even though the odds were that things could be okay the reality was that it was likely to be one of three abnormalities, two of which are fetal and the third of which is Down Syndrome. And so, then there came the decision of what do we do, and the various options were first – to take no further action and just let the pregnancy develop; the second was a CVS (Chorionic Villus sampling) which is the most risky but gives the most information, the third was to wait until week sixteen and have amniocentesis – again, not as risky, and the fourth is to terminate the pregnancy. Sheri is basically pro-choice and that's not where she would automatically go; however there was concern that the fetus not be in pain and difficulty in that information was to know what was going on. So they made the decision to do a CVS. On Friday afternoon at 5:20 they got the phone call that the baby was going to be living with Down syndrome and a major part of them was that it would be okay; but another part of them was admitting it would be a struggle and some sadness and disappointment. So, they were worried about the challenges the baby might face, they were worried about raising a second child and having the resources and support to do this. So Sheri writes, what did I do? I went to church. In the midst of our challenging weekend I reached out to MCC and had a profound experience. I sat in the balcony surrounded by strangers. I wondered if they could sense my sadness. I read the banner that said, *My house shall be a house of prayer for all people* and I knew I was in the right place! I knew that a community steeped in a history that fought for social justice for all was a community that I needed to provide for my baby. I cried through the entire service. I couldn't contain it and I'm sure those around me wondered what was going on. That profound experience has been the first of many here: the sermons, the music, the opportunity



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to share music have provided huge support. Sheri has decided to take off the bib and put on the apron here. She really has a passion to be able to reach out to other families that crosses various barriers where there is misunderstanding and often discrimination in society against families, particularly where one of the children is living with Down syndrome. Can we look past the differences and see the giftedness that people can be? Sheri wants to begin a conversation with us about what it would be like here at MCC Toronto if we more openly and assertively reached out to be the house of prayer for all people, to support families. She writes that she can relate to the mothers who are fighting to change society's views of gays, lesbians and trans-gendered children. My heart breaks for the challenges our babies face, she says. We want to protect them from everything. We want to celebrate their lives. We want all of society to see them for the blessings we know them to be. MCC has created a wonderful momentum in the area of social justice. Could this be our next frontier?

And finally, the business that God is in – from the Old Testament prophets to Jesus to today God has always called forth leaders to do the business of God. Yes, called all of us to be involved. God has also called forth leaders to be involved. And so this morning I would like to issue an extra challenge: to those of you who have been called into leadership – be that leadership in terms of becoming clergy in our denomination to serve congregations; be that leadership in terms of taking on programs and initiatives that continued invisible necessary support systems that need to be in place in this church or through this church; that leadership to reach out to those who are facing challenges to make sure that they don't have to face those challenges alone.

I wish you would go from this place and simply mind your own business knowing that that business is the business of God. That business is to be able to create safe space. That business is seeking out those who need help. That business is about creating something out of nothing; being about transforming our world. That business is about loving unconditionally and believe me, we are called to lead. That's the business of God. That's our business. Now let's go and mind our own business.

Amen.