



LESSONS for LIFE

January 6, 2008

RSVP Series/ Part 1 "R"

Recognizing our Past and our Potential

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: JAMES 2: 17 – 18

Gospel: LUKE 4: 16 - 21

Today is the first Sunday of 2008 and John and I have a practice on New Year's Day to spend some quiet time away from each other and to take a look at our lives and assess how things are going and do our goal setting. We don't do resolutions because we find they are too easy to break so we do some goal setting for the year. This first Sunday of the year is also an opportunity for us as a congregation to look back a little bit on the past and to be able to talk about this year together. This is particularly important *this* year, because this year we enter into the 35th anniversary of the establishment of this congregation and we've chosen as our theme for the year 'Celebrating our Past and Securing our Future'. And we've designated January as RSVP month. And so each Sunday we're going to take a different letter of 'RSVP' and talk about that together.

And so today is 'R' of 'RSVP'. 'R' standing for recognizing our past and recognizing our potential. In the reading from the Book of James that Grace shared with us, in the early church they had this argument – what's most important : is it your faith or is it your works? Some folks believe that the most important thing was is personal piety. Your personal relationship with God. Your personal growth. Other folks said, no, what's most important is us being out in the world, doing good things, making the world a better place. So, there was this argument back and forth and in the Book of James, James acknowledges the importance of both. However, he says, faith without works is dead. If we just take our spiritual journey, our relationship to God and if it's only expressed as internal piety or a personal relationship with God, without being expressed actively in the world in terms of good works, then he says our faith is dead.

So I want to take a brief look, back over 35 years and during this look over the last 35 years, I want to touch on four key areas. The first, spirituality and recognizing 35 years of good works in the area of spirituality. There have been many thousands of people who have been touched by what they've experienced through this church. Many people who may have given up on God or spirituality for a variety of different reasons. But they came here, maybe with a friend for the first time, maybe dragged into this place kicking and screaming, maybe came here very skeptical but were surprised by the sense of the holy, of love, of a feeling of home here. Touched by worship; touched by music. Now I am very clear about the priorities. I've often said that many a bad sermon has been saved by a great solo. Recognizing the music in a very particular way, in a most powerful way, touches people in a deeper way than the spoken word ever could. And we are very blessed and have been very blessed for many, many years to have the power of music touch us and change us. Worship, spirituality, we've been called in a sense to re-spiritualize



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communities. We do that through sermon series. We do that through those faithful folks under Mary's leadership who take every Sunday the tape of the sermon and transcribe it by hand and then put it on the website so that people around the world then can go to the website and read the sermons. Recently I spoke to someone who was checking out our church and he said to me, his first Sunday he said, I've read the last two years of your sermons. And I said, you still came to church? (laughter). This will be more and more true for folks who are skeptical of religion. That they will go to churches' websites and they will read about churches before they walk in the door and trust themselves to those churches. Thirty-five years of spirituality.

Also, recognizing 35 years of pastoral care. The deacons are the main folks in our church who offer pastoral care and they are available after services, they are available by appointment to meet with people, to help people, to support people, to help people and their families through transitions in their lives, through personal moments of crisis, through bereavement, through loss. We also, over the years, have had teams of folks available to help in the midst of HIV/AIDS, in the midst of addictions and to be supportive. Thirty-five years of caring for people.

Also, recognizing 35 years of social justice. People have often asked me why is it that Canada has made so much progress in the issue of social justice for LGBT people compared to other countries. And if I might say so, one of the reasons, and I think one of the very key reasons, is the role of this church. For whenever the religious right are able to take an argument and reduce it down to God versus gays, we lose. And MCC Toronto's role has been very public and very strong now for 35 years, to make sure that that argument does not have weight. And to say that there are many people of faith who support human rights and social justice. Whether it be in the human rights code, or marriage or other issues.

And also 35 years of service to our city - in a variety of ways through offering our space, through our community outreach partner grants that we give to other organizations, to hosting the Triangle Program, now literally hundreds of students who've been helped back into the educational system. Those are ways you may have heard about or are more obvious. But there are some ways that are quieter ways. After the attack on the World Trade Centre, there began an initial response, in some cases a violent response, against people of the Muslim faith or people from Arab countries. Our church, MCC Toronto, was the *first* church in this city, to speak out publicly and to call for tolerance and calm and understanding in the midst of that response. And after the attacks on Jewish synagogues in northern Toronto, our church called and said to the United Jewish Appeal, we would be honoured if you put your signs on our property this year. We want to show our support for you, and they did, and welcome that kind of support.

Thirty-five years of service, in spirituality, in pastoral care, in social justice and in service to our city. Recognizing our past. Also, recognizing our potential. Our potential in spirituality. Statistics show us that the Christian church in northern America is on the decline, quite dramatically. Fewer and fewer people are going to church. Or temple, or synagogue or mosque. And yet at the same time people are searching in greater numbers for a positive, vibrant spirituality. They can find positive spirituality in other places and they can find vibrant spirituality in other places, but there aren't many places who bring that progressive, vibrant spirituality. People want a relevant spirituality that makes sense to them. They want to be able to ask their questions and have those questions addressed. We get a great response from family members and friends and guests who come to church and yet most people in this city have no idea what we're about.



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Most people don't really know what MCC Toronto is about. They may think we are a bunch of Bible thumpers playing church. They may think we're a church for gays only. They may think that we're a typical church. None of which are true. This morning I want to announce to you four initiatives that the Board of Directors have included in their draft budget to be finally examined and hopefully approved later this month.

The first of those initiatives we've placed in that draft budget this year, is a sum of \$10,000 to be able to be used to reach out and promote our church. Other than Pride Day and Christmas Eve we don't spend one penny reaching out to people, letting them know that we're here, not one cent. Telling people who don't know about us, that they're welcome. So I celebrate, with the Board of Directors, that initiative to be able to say we care for people who haven't heard about who we are.

Secondly the Board of Directors has placed in the budget, at the request of our denomination, an additional 2% of our offerings to go to strengthen churches in Canada. If you travel across Canada, west of Ontario there isn't a single Metropolitan Community Church. And other than MCC Toronto, there isn't a single Metropolitan Community Church that averages more than 30 or 40 people on a Sunday. We need to be helping those churches. We need to be supporting the growth of MCC churches in Canada. And so from now on, two cents of every dollar that you give will be going to support Canadian churches.

It has been said, MCC Toronto is on the verge of being the church of choice for progressive people in the city of Toronto. I believe we have an opportunity to write a shiny example to United churches and to Anglican churches who are progressive and who want to grow, who want to reach out and who want to be relevant, who want to do church in a new way. That we can be an example to help to re-ignite that sense of excitement and enthusiasm in our sister denominations. Our potential in spirituality.

Also, recognizing our potential in pastoral care. You know at the height of the AIDS deaths, this congregation was doing 50 to 60 funerals a year, 90% for people outside of the church. We were caring for 90 to a hundred people in their homes. The AIDS crisis is not over. At the same time the number of women impacted by breast cancer is increasing and we very much need to be involved in both of those endeavours and others. We very much need to be there in the midst of the challenges people face personally around addictions, around depression, or loss of hope.

Recognizing our potential in social justice. Around the world there is an increase in violence. An *increase* in violence against LGBT people and recently I was told that is being funded primarily by the religious right from the United States. Those funds going from the US mainly to Eastern Europe countries to Russia etc, those countries; and to try to make sure that no extension of rights is given to GLBT people. It has been said that a religious attack requires a religious response. And so I announce the third of those four initiatives. At the request of our denomination our Board of Directors has included in the draft budget an additional 2% of our offering to go to establish a church in Poland. There are many historic connections between the city of Toronto and the country of Poland. We've had a number of enquiries from Warsaw and Krakow and they've asked for us to plant a church in Poland. And so in October I'll be going to Warsaw, to a conference of MCCs from Eastern Europe, and I'll be meeting with the people there who will be making a decision as to which city and how our church can help. But in the



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meantime, beginning today, two cents of every dollar you give will be going to Poland to plant a church there.

Additionally, the denomination has asked me to be the human rights point person for Poland. That I would take what we've learnt in Canada, around human rights issues, and be available to the political leaders in Poland where right now the attack is a strongly religious attack. To take what we've learned and to be able to help the advancement of human rights in Poland.

Also, in terms of social justice, recognizing the power of the Internet and the opportunity for us to use the Internet more effectively. And the denomination is sending me to Fort Lauderdale in a few weeks to meet with folks there to talk about how we can use the Internet more effectively. Particularly for social justice work.

And fourthly, the potential to serve our city. Recognizing that potential. To become a visual leading church, to be an example through our generosity and through our service to others in the city. You know it's exciting for me when I look back at the past and see all the things we've done together. However, I must say to you this morning I find it extremely frustrating to talk about the potential part. A few months ago in one of my sermons I said to you that... I said to you that we needed to figure out a new way to do church, that I couldn't continue to do the way it's been. And frankly at that time I was really, really close to burning out and as close to resigning as I've ever been in all of these years. And when I said I needed to do church differently and that I couldn't continue to carry on the way we were doing, it really scared some folks who said, Brent what are you talking about? And so I went to the Board of Directors and I said to the Board, I *can't* do this, this way anymore and yet I really know that I'm called to be the pastor of this church. And I asked the Board to look at hiring an executive director to run the church. The Board wants me to be doing other things. And they're right. I need to be out in the community more, I need to be fundraising more, I need to be working on my sermons more, I need to make sure we plan further ahead so we can do more things to support them and promote them etc. And I can't do that at the same time being the CEO of the church in any kind of an active way. We have *great* staff who are trying really hard, but with the current capacity and the current volume of work, I keep getting drawn back into the day-to-day way too much. And frankly, I'm really bad at it. I'm not beating myself up, that's the truth, I'm *really* bad at it. So Anne Bradley and John Vespa did a study of what model we should use, they made recommendations to the executive, they wrestled with it, the executive made a recommendation to the Board and in December the Board approved us hiring an executive director to run the church.

I'm so thankful for that courage, because that's really going to stretch us this year. The last two years we've had a surplus budget, not a lot, but a surplus budget and so this is going to stretch, but frankly we need to do this. This is the right thing for our church, so that our church staff will be more supported, so that we'll be able to run the church. I have a million visions of what this church can be. You have two million. You know if we combine all these visions together it's amazing what we can do, but the truth is we are not realizing our potential. So I would like to thank the Board for this courage and help, and it will free me up to do what you want me to do. And it will also help the church to be run better, but it's going to re-stretch us financially as we add this new position to our church.



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And so we said January is RSVP month and here's what it comes down to. In your order of service this morning you were given two little forms. One is a volunteer form. If we're going to realize our potential we need more of you committed to helping us. And the second form is a financial commitment form. And on that financial commitment form you have the opportunity to make a weekly pledge to the church, you can do it in one of two ways. The first box gives you an opportunity to do that as a regular deduction. I'm one of those folks who is a sustainer. I have all my offerings deducted from my credit card. I - want - those - air - miles! (laughter). Some people say give enough that it makes you feel good. And I say give enough that it sends you on a trip! (laughter). So you can do that, you can make a weekly pledge and it will be deducted monthly though, because we can't make those deductions every week. So it will be calculated weekly, multiplied by 52, divided by 12, deducted monthly. If you don't want to do an automatic deducted, then there's that second one, where it says, My pledge for 2008 will be ___, that means per week. So you make a weekly pledge and then each quarter when you get your giving statements, we'll let you know how you're doing against your pledge. Money to reach out into the city. Money to help establish a church in Poland. Money to strengthen our churches in Canada and money to help us hire an executive director. This is RSVP month, we need to hear back from you.

Jesus stood up in the synagogue. They gave him the ancient scriptures and he opened to a very specific place, it said. And he read this scripture to people. I want to read it again to you, taking a few liberties with the wording. Jesus said, the spirit of God is upon you. For God has anointed you. God has called you to bring good news to those who've given up hope. God has called you to bring good news to those who are poor. God has called you to proclaim release to the captives. To those people who are captive to addictions, to those people who are captive to low self esteem, to those people who are captive to dysfunctional religion. God says proclaim release. Recovery of sight to the blind, to those who cannot see the possibility of a better way, or a better world. For you to re-ignite hope and enthusiasm and commitment to change the world to be a better place. God has called you to let the oppressed go free, God has called you to proclaim the year of God's favour. Then Jesus rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant. And Jesus said, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. The needs that existed in the time of Isaiah, were still the needs that existed in Jesus' day. They were the same needs 35 years ago when this church was founded and they are the same needs today. May it be said, that today, this scripture will be fulfilled in our hearing, that we will go forth celebrating our past, securing our future and making the world a much, much better place for those who will come after us.

Amen.