



LESSONS for LIFE

January 27, 2008 11:00 a.m.

RSVP Series

“P” PRACTICES (Spiritual Practices)

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, CM

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: ACTS 2: 43 - 47

Gospel: JOHN 10: 10

This year 2008 is the 35th anniversary year of our church and our theme for this year is Celebrating our Past and Securing our Future; and for the first few weeks of this sermon series in January we celebrated a number of moments: things in the past of this church, and we talked about the future. Indeed, we've named this month, January, our RSVP month; partly a stewardship campaign month but also introducing our theme. On the first Sunday the “R” stood for recognizing our past and recognizing our potential. Second, the “S” stood for stewardship. Now frankly I wasn't very happy when I noticed in the bulletin on the Sunday before that folks had listed it would be about stewardship because I thought that will be the Sunday when everybody will take a day off, but we were very pleased with the folks who still came anyway for the stewardship sermon and we talked about the importance of our collective financial resources in moving our church forward. Last week the “V” stood for volunteerism. In any church, and in particular in this church, volunteers are at the heart of what we are able to do and the importance of all of you who contribute in that way. Today the “P” is to be about practice, spiritual practice. However, after the nine o'clock service I went to some folks and said, “Do you have any suggestions for my sermon? I think it needs help.” I got a few ideas but I'm somehow going to shift and change it as I go through it and see where we end up.

This sermon was to talk about practices, about the importance of individuals growing spiritually; the importance of people taking responsibility for their own spiritual development. We take a look at the early church in the reading from Acts and we see that those early Christians were excited about the movement they were involved in and that they were regularly together, learning and growing. Now we know enough about that early church that when they gathered to learn together it wasn't simply a matter of the bishops coming to tell them the truth; not at all. That early church was a vigorous place of diversity, of differences of opinion, of debating, even arguing and of struggling together; a place where that diversity of opinion was welcomed and was encouraged. But they took seriously learning what they could learn so they could go deeper spiritually. And so we are challenged to do the same thing. We are also challenged to take responsibility for our own spiritual development and spiritual journey.

Recently I was at the meetings – last Sunday if you were here you knew I was quite sick and I was really dragging myself through church that day. I was tempted to take out the membership list and grab one of your names at random and ask you to preach, but I decided not to do that because you never know what you're going to get! But I was sick and I had to fly out the next day to go to Ft. Lauderdale. Ft. Lauderdale and MCC Toronto are the two largest metropolitan community churches out of our 220 churches around the world and we are now meeting regularly to work with each other and to work on some projects together and it's very exciting and very invigorating. At the meeting this week one of the folks brought in a photocopy from Christian Century magazine about Willow Creek Community church in Chicago, the largest Christian church in North America, doing some very cutting edge things around



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worship and volunteerism. I have a great difference of opinion in their theology and on almost everything I can imagine. However, it is a church that is doing some new and different things, but the article in *Christian Century* was quite shocking because Willow Creek did some examination and found out that much of what they're doing as a church is not working for individuals. Getting thousands of people involved, doing things and being busy in the church was not addressing people's need to go deeper spiritually, and so they're having to look at what they can do differently. Now frankly, when I read the article my first thought was, Aha, what we're doing and helping people to grow spiritually, that's where it's at; we need to be doing this. But then frankly I got kind of scared because if one of the leading fundamentalist churches in North America is taking spiritual growth and spiritual development seriously, then we had better be taking it very very seriously. We should not be giving ground to fundamentalist churches who, along with spiritual growth, will bring – in my opinion – an unhealthy theology. And so we also recognize that worship is not enough. As wonderful as worship is here, as great as the music is, as great as the sermons occasionally are, as wonderful as worship is here it is inevitable that just coming to worship Sunday after Sunday you will get bored. It will become familiar. It will become too routine. It will not be enough; and to go deeper spiritually requires us to take responsibility for our own spiritual growth in addition to worship opportunities. There are huge opportunities in front of us as a church. There are huge challenges in front of us as a church, and so we will be working hard over the next few months to provide for you a wide range of spiritual growth opportunities. Some of them we call elective courses, and there is a hand-out that talks about the courses you can sign up for today. There are also twelve core courses in our curriculum that are being developed over the next couple of years by the Reverend Jo Bell.

In order for this to move forward in a full way we need more of you to help by being facilitators, help develop those courses, help to teach elective courses as well. A few years ago, under John Vespa's leadership, we had a team to take a look at our future: where we should be heading and how we should do things differently as a church, and that team wrestled with why we are in business. The team came up with this concept: that MCC Toronto is in the business of transformation; of helping individuals to be transformed individually and together to transform our world. Jesus said, *I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly*. This was a stunning statement, in my opinion. This is a revolutionary statement in my opinion. Jesus said, *I did not come for these high and lofty purposes of having you worship me*. Not at all. *I did not come for to build a new religious movement* – not at all. Jesus said, *I came so that YOU might experience as fully as possible this abundant life* and in order for you to experience it and the rest of the world to have access to it we have to change the world. We have to change the world so that individuals and nations and communities and groups can experience this abundant life.

At the beginning of this month we talked about new initiatives that the Board of Directors has launched to reach people in new ways across our city, to help support Metropolitan Community churches across Canada; to be invited by our denomination to be part of planting a new church in Poland, the first MCC in Poland and to be involved in human rights in eastern Europe, particularly in Poland. The reality is that much of the opposition to human rights in many of its forms comes from religious institutions. The reality is that what we have been able to accomplish in Canada we now need to accomplish around our world. Huge opportunities and challenges before us. In order for us to meet those challenges we need you to RSVP frankly. We need you to make a commitment in terms of volunteering – and we just happen to have placed a form on your bulletin for that purpose. We need you to help financially – and we just happen to have placed a form in your Order of Service for that purpose. This morning you will have heard – or you've heard already – about this wonderful amazing gift we're given called life; and



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yet a very many folks, for a variety of reasons, aren't able to experience those ordinary miracles; and our job is to remind them of that and to transform the world so that they can experience it. A little later you'll hear the offering song talk about our dreams and our hopes and how those in many cases are not fulfilled but the importance of us persisting and continuing on that path. This week I spoke to my partner John and I said, "John I want to talk about folks having a difficult time and what's important to get through it," and I said, "I know you're not going to be in church on Sunday," because he's in London visiting his Mum and Dad", but I said, "Can I talk about your struggles?" and he said, "Yes." He's given me some boundaries. John went through a very difficult period in his life and he says if it wasn't for being in a relationship and if it wasn't for this church he's not sure that he would have come through those difficulties. Relationships can help us through difficult times. Healthy faith communities can help us through those difficult times; and I have to say to you that when John was going through those difficulties I felt extremely inadequate, even guilty. Here I was, the Pastor of a church. I'm the one who's supposed to have the answers, especially for those close to me, and yet I didn't know what to do and I had to rely on faith that things would be okay. I had to rely on perseverance in the Koran. There's a verse that says, *God blesses those who persevere*. If I'm nothing more, I'm a stubborn Maritimer and perseverance is what we're given at birth if you're born in the Maritimes: stubbornness and perseverance. And so we hung in through those difficult times and through John coming here Sunday after Sunday and participating in the music of the church and hearing the words more in the hymns than in the sermons because frankly he doesn't pay much attention to me when I preach! He doesn't pay attention to me when I don't preach either – but anyway, it was more in the gift of the music of this church that he constantly received the support and encouragement to hang in through the difficulties until he got to the other side. I don't think he's alone in all this. I don't think I'm alone in all this. So I came to you in the Fall and I said to you, I can't continue to do this the way we've been doing it. It's wearing me out frankly and this 35 year old living in a 57 year old body was finding it more and more difficult. And so I asked the Board of Directors if they would hire an Executive Director to help run the church and after due diligence and examination they made the decision to do so. When you add a new Executive Director, when you add increasing our offerings to help in Poland, increasing our offerings to help in Canada and additional outreach to the City of Toronto, all of those means that our budget is stretched this year.

But this is not just about budget. This is about individuals reaching out to us every Sunday. I believe that on every Sunday someone comes here on the verge of giving up and this is their last chance to connect again and to receive hope. Every week we know someone visits our Web-site from somewhere around the world. Maybe it's a parent or a kid trying to find something to hold on to and to receive hope and encouragement. So frankly, what we're doing is not about me, although it is true I need help. We want to serve you better, engage you better and help you to grow, but it's also not about you. What we do here in this church, it's about the folks who are here in this church. It's about the folks who are facing a crisis in their life and they need help. It's about the person going through a difficult period, ready to give up and they need help. It's about the partner or the parent who's frankly terrified about the one they love and whether they can hang in long enough who need help. It's about challenging bad religion all over the world. It's behind the discrimination and the prejudice and that's causing people to give up. It's about the folks who have questions about religion and until they have an opportunity to wrestle with their questions openly without being judged are more apt to walk out than to speak up. It's about a general sense of hopelessness and the need to encourage people just one more time to keep on doing it, to keep on dreaming and loving and caring and reaching out.



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There are many opportunities and challenges facing us. We can have an impact on individuals and on our world far beyond what we have already seen, and it's been quite the journey so far. And so you have an invitation to come and be part of this. You have an open invitation to be part of an amazing congregation taking on huge challenges; and frankly, we need you to RSVP.

And so today we conclude another stewardship month. It hasn't been the most sparkling, but hopefully, together we'll be more than we have ever been, to touch more than we have ever touched and hopefully, the world will be a better place because together, together we have dreamed of a world that could be. We are not satisfied with the world that is. We are grateful for the gift of life and we are grateful for the one who came that we might have an even more abundant life and we now know that he's passed the torch to us.

Amen.