



## LESSONS for LIFE

February 24, 2008

**BORN AGAIN**

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes C.M.

### SACRED READINGS

**Lesson: Where There is Love, You Are There, Robert Holden**

**Gospel: John 3: 1 - 7**

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I said this morning at 9 o'clock that I'm kind of exhausted; physically and emotionally. So please bear with me as I try to get through two sermons this morning. The first one is part of our series and the second one is about Ottawa.

We're in the midst of a sermon series called Happiness Now based on a book by Robert Holden called Happiness Now. In this series we began by talking about how happiness is something we search for and that's part of the problem. How happiness is something we try to grab on to outside of ourselves and that's part of the problem. I used the little silly example of putting my glasses here and then going looking for my glasses over here and here and here and over there. As long as I looked for my glasses out there I was never going to find them. But when I realised that my glasses were already here was when I found them. The same is true for happiness. We can go searching for it in the world and we will never find it. Maybe momentary glimpses, but certainly not a lifetime of happiness which is what we're called to experience - life abundantly, as Jesus said - full of joy, as Jesus said.

Last week we talked about happiness not being a set of circumstances, but a set of attitudes. And in those attitudes the beginning foundational attitude is that we are created in the image of God. The stuff of God is in each one of us. That image of God in each one of us, that's the place we start from. Not original sin; we start with original blessing. Not less than, not sinners, we start with that we are created in the image of God. And in that image of God Holden says to us that the essence of who we are is love and peace and joy. That those are the image of God in us and that as we connect with the love in us and let it flow, the peace in us and let it flow, the joy in us and let it flow, that those are the ingredients of happiness, reconnecting to those places. And yes there will be positive, believe me, and negative influencers in our lives. There will be amazing things and challenging things happen to us. They are influencers not deciders. We make the choice. We make the decisions. And so today as we continue in this series one of the most important decisions that faces us.

Marcus Borg in his book The Heart of Christianity, which we covered in detail a couple of years ago, talks about an example of a young girl, two years old I believe, who when her parents told her that they were going to have another baby she got all excited and she said, "Can I talk to the baby by myself when the baby comes home?" The parents were a little nervous about this, but she was a good kid and they thought it was okay, so they said sure. Nine months later when they brought the baby home from the hospital they took the baby into the nursery and put her in the crib and turned on the monitor and walked out. The little girl ran up to the crib and she whispered to the baby, "Can you tell me about God? I've almost forgotten."

That true story reminds us where we come from. We come from God. And Marcus Borg in his book talks about a process, a natural process that then begins. That process that begins at birth he called independence.



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We learn how to be independent. We learn how to be independent from our mother's womb. We learn how to be independent and breathe on our own and eat on our own and eventually talk and eventually walk and live on our own, a natural process of increasing independence. The difficulty with this process though is that the more and more we become independent, the danger is that we become independent from each other and from God.

Robert Holden in his book takes a little bit of a different perspective. He says that at birth we begin a process he calls separation. A process separating us from other people, a process separating ourselves from what he calls our authentic self - love and peace and joy. And that we begin that process of separation from the spiritual realm. You know, children in their magical playful way with their playful friends and the magic they see all around them, they may be more realistic than we are. And that process of separating ourselves from our authentic self – love, peace and joy, separating ourselves from that place that is most infused with the spirit and the presence of God. So whether we call it Borg's independence or Holden's separation, a natural process that begins at birth, the challenge is that as independence and separation increases how do we maintain our connective ness even deepen our connective ness with our real selves, our universal selves, with each other and with the Holy.

Today, Jesus in the reading says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. You must be born again." We have the choice for a second birth; celebrating our first birth that brought us into this world and gave us this wonderful, wonderful gift called life and all the responsibilities for each other that come with it. And now we have a chance for a second birth, that which is born of the spirit. The spirit to make the intentional decision not to continue the independence, to not continue the separation, but to make a decision to come back again to our source and to be born again. Now, in order to affirm this and hold on to this you've got, I think, to take what Fundamentalists have done with this concept of born again and set it aside. Because I believe they have misinterpreted the Scriptures. Seeing it literalistically, I can see how they made the mistake. But if we take the Scriptures and go back to its scriptural meaning, we see way before Jesus, back in Genesis and Exodus the concept of salvation when the people of God were called to reconnect again with God. Salvation means healing your relationship with God. So the concept of calling people back into relationship to be saved, to work on your salvation, to come back again and be connected with God is an ancient tradition and an ancient calling.

Jesus illustrates this with the story of the Prodigal Son, when a young man was born into and raised into a loving, loving home. Then over time he decided to separate himself. He decided to become independent and he took his portion of the family wealth and went off on his own and became so independent and so separated. He eventually squandered his inheritance and a part of his life. But that call was there to come back home again. Eventually he swallowed his pride and risked going back home again. He was welcomed with open arms and with no judgement. In that story Jesus wants to get the message to us as well that no matter what we have done there is that call to come back home again spiritually, that call to come back to our source and our strength.

Being born again, making that intentional decision to make reconnecting a priority. To make spirituality a priority, that decision is at the centre of our faith - reconnecting to our source, remembering our original connection. The Gospel reading today, Nicodemus went to Jesus and Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of spirit is spirit. Nicodemus you must be born again. You've got to reconnect, you've got to come back home again." Nicodemus said, "How can I do that? I'm old. How can I be born again?"



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Being born again is an intentional decision. For some folks that decision will be abrupt and dramatic, at a church service maybe, in the midst of a piece of music maybe, in the midst of a crisis bringing you back home again, waking you up maybe, but for many people that decision to be born again will be a gradual, evolving decision over time. Reconnecting, going deeper. In Judaism it's called "The Way", living on the way. In Islam, one of the meanings of the word Islam is to surrender to the Holy. In Buddhism it's "Letting go". In many of the world's major religions there is this call to come back home again, to be reborn again.

In Holden's book he said, in being born again the pain in our lives can breathe once more. It feels less intense. It subsides so that there is room to breathe. In being born again our tears begin to smile. Difficulties will always be there, but our response to them changes and their power over us diminishes. Hurt softens and guilt loses its edge he says when we are born again. These harmful emotions no longer impact us. Judgement stops. Fear loses fear of fear. We are born again because we come home to where we have always been. We come home to happiness. We come home again to love and peace and joy as ways of living. Indeed, we come home again to God.

Okay. This morning, it was kind of ironic I think the number of men that came up to me and said are you going to tell us who wore what in Ottawa? (laughter) The number of women who came up and said, "Is the Governor General really that hot in person as she is on TV? (more laughter)

I'd like to put my sharing with you about Ottawa in context. Twenty-seven years ago today I was in the ninth day of a 25 day fast protesting police actions around the Gay baths, just 27 years ago. Put it in context with today. There are 68 countries in the world where everybody in this room, Gay or Straight, would be arrested for being in this kind of a gathering. In ten countries we would be executed. There were no protesters in Ottawa.

John and I went up early on Tuesday because we wanted to just spend a couple of days experiencing the magic of Ottawa and just to be there in anticipation of Friday. It was a phenomenal experience that I am still overwhelmed by it. I don't know how many times during the week I would just look at John and say, "I am so fortunate."

Friday morning at 9:15 we met the officials of the Governor General's office in the lobby of the hotel where all of the Order of Canada recipients were gathered. And it was quite amazing to be mingling among this group of people. We drove on buses to Rideau Hall. We drove up to this building I had seen in pictures before. We got out and went into the front entrance of Rideau Hall. There were folks there to greet us and to show us where the cloak rooms were and to welcome us and to say congratulations. Then they separated the recipients from our guests and we went into another room for a briefing. They said, would you like some tea or coffee? and I thought no because the last thing I want to do is have to go to the bathroom part way through the ceremony. (laughter) I didn't say that, but that's what I thought. But then I thought I have an opportunity here to have tea at Rideau Hall, so I went over and got some tea in these beautiful dishes at Rideau Hall.

They briefed us about how to walk in and what to do and different ways we were supposed to do it and we were all terrified that we would bow the wrong way or turn the wrong way or do the wrong thing. Just trying to get it all down, we were all practicing with each other. Then they lined us all up and Molly Johnson, who has sung here at our church before, was there and we all got lined up and I said to Molly, "Let's all switch places and surprise them." (laughter) So we had second thoughts though and we didn't. We behaved ourselves.



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Then it came time for us to walk into the Hall and everyone stood and applauded. I looked over and saw John's face, my two sisters and my brother who drove up the night before from New Brunswick, two of whom had never been in Ottawa before and drove up and saw their faces and realised where I was. So we stood there as the Governor General spoke brilliantly about service and about how proud she was of everyone. I can't remember much else of what she said frankly because it was a fog. She was brilliant and I kept saying, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry. Then they called my name.

I stood up and walked down the aisle, bowed as I was supposed to and walked over and stood beside where I was supposed to and the secretary to the Governor General read the tribute that they had written. And twice they said, Gay and Lesbian, in Rideau Hall. Twice. Then there was applause as I walked over to the Governor General and I'm told by some of you this morning and some other people that were there that it was a very long and sustained applause. People were really proud of the room because it wasn't just my family that were applauding. There were other people. When they talked about that I had performed the first same-sex union I looked down at Jean Chretien, who was sitting in the front row, and I said, "Thank you."

Then the Governor General said, I think, something to me like, "You've worked many long, hard years for this." or something like that. Then as she pinned the medal on she said, "This is for that spirit of inclusiveness." Normally this medal (Order of Canada) is only worn on very formal occasions, but I asked for permission to wear it this morning. And informally, I got permission.

Jean Chretien, Pamela Wallin, Molly Johnson and me.

After the ceremony there was a reception. We milled around and talked with each other. There were media interviews. Then I took my family for lunch at the Chateau Laurier. Wonderful. Expensive, but wonderful. (laughter) Thank you Visa. Then we had to quickly go back to the hotel and change, and I did wear my Harry Rosen suit and I flashed everybody. (laughter) Then we changed for the Black tie dinner that night and got ready. We got the buses again and before the dinner they did a group picture. The front row, there were three rows of us, was reserved for some of the dignitaries including Jean Chretien. They asked us to gather round and so I marched right up and stood behind Jean Chretien. I wasn't about to be in the back row or in the corner. Sorry, but... Molly Johnson said, "Brent, I'm going to do rabbit ears behind you during the picture." And I said, "If you do that to me, I'm doing it to him." (Jean Chretien) And Molly said, "Okay, okay then. We won't do it."

Then we had a phenomenal dinner. I sat beside the Press Secretary for the Governor General. I told her about this CD that I had taken with me that morning to the ceremony. How this (the CD) represented all of you; the names of our donors, our members, our volunteers so that you could be with me there in Rideau Hall. I took it back that night to the dinner with me. I asked if she would write something on it so the Press Secretary to the Governor General wrote this; "Thank you for coming with Rev. Hawkes to the ceremony and dinner for the Order of Canada on Friday, February 22, 2008 in Ottawa. Monique Bergeron, Press Secretary to the Governor General."

As members of the Order of Canada one of the privileges we have is that we can preside at the swearing in ceremony for new Canadian citizens. And so someday I will get the call to do that. Just imagine!

I brought back a few mementos. I didn't steal any of the dishes. (laughter) John will be at a table in the social hall with the certificate, which is quite beautiful, that I'll get framed with the menu for the evening, the program



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from the day. There are a number of those mementos if you'd like to look at them. CPAC will be broadcasting the full ceremony today at 1:30 p.m. and tonight or tomorrow morning at 1 a.m.

I met an amazing woman named Bertha Clark who also got the Order of Canada, an Aboriginal woman from Alberta who was there in a wheelchair helped by her granddaughter. She wore a cape, a shawl that was made by one of her nieces, I believe, for just that occasion; it was red with white symbolising the Order of Canada. In the 1950's she started the first organisation for Aboriginal women in Alberta to give them a voice, an amazing woman.

I am so blessed; however, the Order of Canada represents the past. On the CD I wrote, "Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto". You got me here. Let's transform the world. This represents the past. You represent the future. I want to thank you for the privilege of being your Pastor. Much work needs to be done. I recruited two other members of the Order of Canada on the bus to help us with the Jamaica situation and they agreed to help. Much work needs to be done. I am committed for quite a number of years to do that work with you. While much work needs to be done today I want to say this. Thank you. Thank you MCC Toronto. Thank you MCC Toronto for the amazing privilege of being your Pastor. And for those like George Hislop and Chris Burchell and many, many people who work so hard, taking great risks that have never been recognised and for all of you who have come out to families or supported your families, for all of you who have stood up for justice in big ways and little ways, you have created the momentum. You have created that wave that I could ride on. Thank you MCC Toronto. And thank you Canada.

Amen.