



## LESSONS for LIFE

May 4, 2008 11:00am  
SHARING OF STORIES  
MAKING A DIFFERENCE  
Dan Trepanier

### SACRED READINGS

**Lesson:** Excerpt from “The Colour Purple” by Alice Walker

**Gospel:** HEBREWS 11: 1-2, 12; from The Message

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Rev. Jo Bell:

I am absolutely honoured this morning to be introducing a friend. About four times during the year we do something called *The Sharing of Stories* and we know you have many stories and we ask one of you to share them with the rest of us; to share your journey, to share your integration with this great church and to share how, through it, you happen to be changing the world. This morning Dan Trepanier comes to us. Dan is the team leader of our refugee support group. He is an active member of the Refugee Sponsorship team. He’s about ‘this close’ (about half inch between thumb and finger) to graduating from *Creating A Life That Matters* our core curriculum and he’s also an anointer/server. That’s in his volunteer time. In his job Dan works at the YMCA and he leads a national public sector internship program that has helped over ten thousand young people in hundreds of communities across Canada. It is an absolute honour, and please join me in welcoming and greeting Dan. (applause).

Dan Trepanier:

Good morning. Six weeks ago I received a phone call from Brent and you know when Brent is calling you that something is up, and he said, “Dan. What are you doing on May 4<sup>th</sup>. Are you free at nine and eleven o’clock? Just say yes.” And I said, “Yes.” “Good. I’d like you to do the talk during the service, just say yes.” Now, notice he didn’t use the word ‘sermon’; he used the word ‘talk’, and I was fine with that and I was deeply honoured – until he said, “Oh, by the way, you have to incorporate a couple of scriptures into your talk and you have to think about the readings, and then I panicked because for me, when it comes to reading the Bible and it comes to remembering scriptures, the only part I seem to get to is the front cover, where it says, *This Book has been Generously placed in your Hotel Room by the Gideons!* And I think that’s hardly the revelation that people are looking for these days. So Brent, you may call it a talk and you and I might call it a story, but right now everybody sitting in those pews is expecting some kind of a sermon and that’s just way too much pressure for this lay person. Still, I’m going to have fun with it. In fact, what would you say or do if you were asked to come up here now, today, and tell your story in front of everybody; to be recorded, to be transcribed, to be immortalized on the internet, to perhaps be judged – because we’re human? What would you do? Any takers? Does anyone want to come here? I thought there’d be more people putting their hands up! It’s quite a challenge, especially if you’re also told to go out on a limb, to expose yourself, to expose your true authentic self and in the absence of ego make it all about you and make it about you and weave a little bit of God into what you’re going to say. And so, six weeks ago I began, after the call, this intense process of trying to put my story together. I’d be walking down the street and I’d



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get an idea and I'd jot it down. I'd be on the subway and I'd start talking to myself, which is not really an issue in the city of Toronto! A couple of days later I'd be at home and just about ready to hop in the shower and I'd get an idea and start talking to myself – okay, I guess that's a little bit of an issue – but I think you get my point and somehow it came together, I do want to thank you, Jo Bell. I want to thank Chris Fraser, the writing coach who helped me, and also Mike Dodds from the men's retreat.

Somebody once said that a smart person has all the answers, whereas a wise person knows the right questions to ask; and since I consider myself more wise than smart I began asking questions and I came to this common theme: What is it about this place, our community, that is so amazing? What is it about me and you and you and you that is so amazing and brings out the best in our community as we inspire others and impact others to grow spiritually and as we make a huge difference in the lives of so many people? So one day as I was sitting in a CLM class (Creating a Life that Matters course) on a Friday and that's when I realized that I am not a human being having a spiritual experience but rather I'm a spiritual being having a human experience and that changed my perspective quite a bit because at that point I learned to be less afraid about going out on a limb, about exposing my emotions and being more authentic and having those difficult life conversations with the people around me. My involvement with the lives of others at MCC has taught me that for sure there would be people today, people like you and me, who would be dead if it were not for MCC. The collective 'us' at MCC who are full of our caring, our compassion, our courage, our faith, our leadership, it's our bedrock beliefs that you can read about on the wall in the social hall; because the reality is that we save lives. This place saved my life because a deacon and a friend listened to me when I was in despair because I thought I'd lost it all – whether it's losing my house, my business, my relationship from the past – someone listened. At times it's the friendly face in the social hall that gives me a hug on a Sunday, many hugs on a Sunday and it makes me realize that I truly am connected to other people. And then there's newcomers to Canada. In this place now, when I see some of the faces here that teach me, teach us a different perspective simply because they can. Me, the anointer who, on the fourth Sunday in the month, stands up there and is invited into your personal space to experience what I call one spiritually intimate moment of healing at a time, and it's such a cool thing to do. In the theme of volunteering don't even think about it: just do it. Sign up at the back, be a volunteer.

Seriously, take the next Creating a Life that Matters course that's offered here at MCC. That program transforms lives and inspired so many of us to explore our relationships, authentic relationships, my authentic relationships with the sacred, with others and with passion. CLM made me realize that in the past my spirituality had been denied because of my sexuality and for twenty years I had given up any idea of a sense of community being possible through any sort of a church because back then I believe that traditional church leaders refused to accept me for the way that God created me; and in retrospect I think it's sad, because I lost twenty years to have a relationship with a higher power. But I'm back on track (applause).

At MCC the connection between sexuality and spirituality coupled with our ability to acknowledge, celebrate and explore these two things is what makes us so darn special as a congregation. Scriptures say God made it plain how to live, what to do, what is required of men and women, and it's quite simple: Do what is fair; do what is just to your neighbour, be compassionate and be loyal in your love and don't take yourself too seriously. Take God seriously. And for me, doing what is fair and what is just is about helping those who are forced to build a new life and start it over,



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especially refugees. Perhaps it's because I've been there, not as a refugee but as someone who has suffered profound loss in my life only later to discover that being fair and just to others, being compassionate in my love and taking myself not too seriously is what heals my wounds. But you see, you have to be careful because I can't walk around saying to people I'm doing God's work healing my wounds because I think that would freak them out a little too much and then they'll run in the other direction! It's kind of hard to explain but I think you know what I mean.

In the past we've heard Brent talk about how no less than eighty member states of the United Nations still criminalize consensual same-sex acts amongst adults with imprisonment and that promotes a culture of hate; and some of these places still have the death penalty; and each year Canada continues to welcome a growing number of newcomers to our country with Toronto being the lead and MCC being part of that story, and some of us being the lead characters in that story. How cool is that? It's not a Harry Potter story but I'll share a couple of stories. Let me tell you about Wan, and if there's anyone here named Wan I'm not talking about you; I just changed the name to protect the person's identity. Wan is well educated in English and he sends me an e-mail from Mexico and then from Bangladesh and he says "Well Dan, I am counting the days till I arrive in Canada but I cannot help the feeling of leaving my partner behind. It's been a nightmare going through all of this and I cannot imagine how hard it is to survive just because we're different. It's become something surreal. I am hiding with a friend. I have nothing, lost everything and feel persecuted by the fact that I'm different. Nobody knows where we are staying because it would mean harm to our lives and I'm counting the day to find a little bit of peace, but a lot of things go through my mind right now. My partner cannot join me because of financial issues and I don't know what's going to happen to him, my love, once I'm gone, maybe forever. Why is this happening Dan?" I don't want to leave him and I'm willing to find a job as soon as I get to a safe place like Canada and I want to thank you for being there on the other side of the computer screen in Toronto, reading my note. It's amazing; we mean nothing to our families any more and I can't believe it. I guess that's the reason I keep writing to you because you give me hope, Dan." And he goes on to say, and I want you really to hear this, "I hope that people who are free and have a chance to be with whoever they want to be with realize how truly lucky they are. Pray for us and pray for my partner. I read all the things your group in Toronto have accomplished and the programs that you and others like you help create and I realize how many people are now happy and able to realize their dreams and I ask for you to make a difference in ours. I know it's not an easy task because all we have is hope, and I look forward to meeting you one day."

Wan has made it to Toronto. He's found a job; he's found a place to live and he's safe, but unfortunately he lost the battle to save his relationship with his partner who is still lost somewhere in Bangladesh, and he doesn't know where. Same sex couples, like opposite sex couples are a reality; form long-term intimate relationships that are emotionally and financially inter-dependent, involving the deepest of personal feelings, emotional commitment, broader family relations and participation in community life and shared social networks and as couples many LGBT raise children and are proud members of this planet and that is what MCC has taught me and that is what MCC continues to teach so many people out there in the world.

There are dozens and dozens of stories and I could stand here literally for an hour, but I won't because I only have, you know, eighteen minutes, but let me tell you about Hamdhi. Hamdhi is from Egypt and although he is not a student of our Triangle program, if you listen to his story he could very well be telling the story of a young person in our school system. "Dan, the way I was



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gesturing with my hands while speaking it made other people pick on me. Other kids bother me, call me names and it made me more stubborn to be myself because I won't change just because other people don't like it." He goes on to say that he never told his parents because if they knew that he was getting beaten up in school because he looked different that he would also get beaten up at home too, and so he often blamed those bruises on his face by playing those 'butch' games in soccer that he never really liked anyway. Hamdhi says, "I have no voice, Dan, and no one believes me. Do you believe me?" As a teenager he had suicidal thoughts a lot. "It's the way I am," he says, "but now I realize that it's not something I've done wrong and I've not done anything bad – just for being myself."

The bottom line is that we really do save lives; and his story goes on and on and on and like many others I get an e-mail through MSN face to face, sitting on a park bench, standing on the corner of Church and Wellesley, locally or abroad and they just keep coming. In fact, I see some faces here today sitting among us. In this congregation right now are people from Brazil, Mexico, from the Ukraine, from Uganda, Iran, Russia and from Turkey, Jamaica, from Indonesia, from Nicaragua, from Nigeria, from Columbia, from Kazakhstan, from Columbia and yes, even from the United States, and they made it and they're here and they're safe and they have the ability to inspire us and I think we should give them a round of applause!

You know, I've told this story a number of times and I still get goose bumps because I have to count my blessings that I, an MCC volunteer, member, donor and simply dressed guy, because of my position of privilege, my position of freedom and because of my position of power can make a very, very big difference in the lives of others through simple daily acts of helping. Do not for a moment, people, underestimate the impact that our collective work has on humankind because it's people like me and you and you and you that are going to heal this messed up planet one simple yet effective act at a time. Persecution directed against our fellow human beings, current or future members of MCC because of the real or presumed sexual orientation is a human rights issue, as is any persecution: torture, extra-judicial execution, arbitrary arrest or denial of freedom of expression and of association are all violations of basic human rights suffered by millions simply by who and where they are. We are, that's you and me, sometimes the first point of contact with many arriving with little more than the shirts on their backs and we Canadians, along with many other cultures, have a lot to offer the world because we're leaders in the field of respecting human rights, including full legal protection for sexual minorities, and that is what makes this place special; and that is what makes us special.

And finally, there's a young woman – having known me for a little less than a month – and she speaks to me in broken English with a little bit of Farsi in between, telling me of a lifetime of torture, emotional and physical abuse from family from teachers, from her parents, from the church, from strangers, from government and from police. I don't think there's anyone else left to add to the list; and as I hide my feelings of embarrassment she begins to show me stab marks, burn marks, slash marks from three failed suicide attempts. More burn marks and scars on her arms from boiling oil that her family tried to pour on her arm, and in a poignant moment of what must have been divine presence while sitting on a park bench with her she turns to me and in a soft voice says, "Why do I not hate the people who do this to me?" and I was stunned by her perspective, as I, the volunteer, was taught a very profound lesson in forgiveness, and I grow as a person. "Why am I still alive and what's life like for me in Canada? What's life like for people like



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me? You help me learn this, Mr. Dan? MCC help me find a boyfriend?" I wanted to tell her about the social hour afterwards, but I didn't want to get into that and I chuckle at her innocence.

So in closing, let me ask you again: What would you do or say if in six months you got a call from Brent or Jo Bell asking you to come up here and tell your story in front of everyone? It's stories like these that unfold because we're called. I'm called and you're called to help them unfold and it's due to our desperately needed time and our talents and our treasures that we build bridges in this place and from this place and we make a difference and we save lives.

Finally, remember what scripture said this morning: It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running and never, never quit!

Thank you. Amen.