



LESSONS for LIFE

February 15, 2009 11:00 a.m.

SHARING OF STORIES

Black White Rainbow A Faith Journey Still Unfolding

Rev. Brent Hawkes, C.M. introduces Jim Marshall

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: ISAIAH 58: 6 - 8

Gospel: MATTHEW 25: 34 - 40

Good morning. I'd like to open with a prayer from one of my favourite writers, Ted Loder. This prayer is from his book *Guerrillas of Grace*. Please pray with me.

Lord, send the gift of your spirit to fill this place, and ourselves, and the world. Touch us with truth that burns like fire, with beauty that moves us like the wind, and set us free, Lord, free us to try new ways of living, free to forgive ourselves and others, free to love and laugh and sing, free to lay aside our burdens of security and free to join the battle for justice and peace; free to listen, to see, to wonder again at the gracious mystery of things and persons, free to be, to give, to receive, to rejoice as children of God. And Lord, teach us how to dance, to turn around and come down to where we want to be, in the arms and hearts of your people, that we may praise you, and enjoy you forever, in your many names, Amen.

Who am I? Well, let me tell you a story. First, my partner Debra and I are both dual citizens, both born in the United States; both came to Canada in 1971 to study at the Institute for Christian Studies. More about them in a bit. I grew up in the United Methodist Church. I was born in Nebraska and our family moved to California in 1954. I met my first wife at a college in California in 1962. Her family was both politically and religiously fundamentalist. We were married in 1965 in the Bible Presbyterian Church, in part through their influence. We moved to Philadelphia in 1966 and I attended Faith Seminary there in the late '60s. There I became totally disillusioned with the fundamentalist way of thinking. It's black and white thinking, and it's controlling leadership. I encountered new influences there, though, along with other frustrated and disillusioned students. This included writings from Francis Schaeffer and it also included early writings from the Christian Institute in Toronto, with a focus on Christianity including all of life. For example, Christian perspectives on economics, the arts, culture, etc.

Our family moved back to California in 1969 where I taught at a small Bible college in Pasadena. I received my MBA from the University of Southern California in 1971. Through these studies, I developed a love for economics and a desire to study further. Our family now with two small children moved again in 1971 into Toronto where I planned to study for one year at the Institute for Christian Studies, to prepare for PhD work in economics at the University of Amsterdam. Debra, my first wife and I met at the student registration desk and we all became close friends. We soon found that we had much in common. We were all from the U.S. and we were all influenced by the same fundamentalist movements and had many friends in common.



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For a variety of reasons we did not go to Amsterdam, so I said no to doctoral work, put my interest in economics on hold, and went to work for a young computer services company, soon to become their manager in market research. My first wife died of cancer in 1974, ten days after giving birth to our third child. She was thirty. Soon after, Debra and I were married. Because of connections at the Institute, we joined the Christian Reform Church and Debra worked as principal for two Christian day schools connected with that denomination.

I kept my interest in economics and public policy alive by volunteering in ecumenical coalitions and campaigning in political elections. Debra began working for the office of the United Church of Canada in 1980 and soon after, our family joined that church. At the time, I found the United Church more strongly social justice focused and we found ourselves welcome at Bloor Street United.

In 1991 I also began working for the United Church National Office as program coordinator for economic justice and social well being. I didn't have to have a PhD and I still made it into economics. My work included social and economic advocacy and policy developments, and it also included encouraging congregations to take these issues seriously in their mission work and to work hard in their communities. In 1999 I became part of new congregational renewal project team at the United Church and our task over time was to help revitalize congregational life in the Church and to encourage congregations to be active agents of hope and reconciliation in their communities.

We held two national events towards this end in 2000 and 2002. Rev. Paul Fairley worked with us in the 2002 event as our plenary worship planner. As part of my work, I took a three month study leave to look for congregations in the United States that effectively integrated faith and justice. I visited several congregations in San Francisco, Washington D.C., Detroit, and Chicago, including Trinity United Church of Christ with Dr. Jeremiah Wright.

After my study leave and the two events, I soon realized that United Church congregants were hesitant to take steps, similar to the congregations in the U.S. that I visited. The social justice movement in many areas is more intellectual and head oriented than when it comes from the heart. So Debra and I continued our search for a congregation where faith and justice and worship and missions were truly integrated and were one.

We found that place here at MCC about four years ago. We're a heterosexual couple with a family member and many friends and colleagues who are from the GLBT community. We truly felt welcomed here and we truly felt at home in this rainbow community. We still do.

I'd like to briefly share my experiences from two of my 1999 visits to help us at MCC wrestle with possible steps we might take to expand our justice work as a congregation, and to think about how to go about this.

We've all heard Brent call for us to prepare to take flight, and to prepare for our own calling. These calls are for us as a congregation, as well as for us as individual members. In this way my story is linked to



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our story. As I share my visit stories with you, I want you to think about what God might be calling us to be, here at MCC, as we move into the next phase of our life.

Let's begin with the Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco. The church sits on the edge of two very different communities, the financial district, and the tenderloin. Over ten years ago they were a congregation of just over 60 people, and Cecil Williams had just been appointed to be their minister to either close them down or to move them into a new phase of ministry. Cecil presented them with a choice- to open their doors east to the financial district or south to the tenderloin. They chose south, and therefore chose the community that would be the focus of their work as partners in God's mission.

I'm now reading from Glide's own program materials.

In the midst of one of S.F.'s harshest urban environments, Glide is an oasis where children grow and even thrive, families reunite, addicts struggle to recover, women break the cycle of powerlessness, and gain their self esteem, and men reach out to embrace rather than brutalize. For over 40 years, Glide has served the poor and disenfranchised in the entire S.F. and Bay area. It has grown to be one of the city's largest nonprofit human service providers, offering innovative and noninvasive programs that address gender and culturally sensitive needs to a diverse population. Glide serves over 1 million free meals a year, provides programs that test people for HIV and AIDS, and offers housing, health care, women's programs, crisis intervention, literacy and computer training, job training and placement, and children, youth and family programs.

These programs work because Glide is diverse. It is a spiritual home of unconditional acceptance. The programs are comprehensive, they focus on healing the whole person, and at the same time also address causal factors such as racism, sexism, incest, domestic violence, rape and divorce. They are not monotonous. By telling their stories, naming their names, people there reclaim themselves, realize their special identity.

At Glide there is no truth too terrible to reveal, there is no hiding place. They are willing to break with tradition. They use unconventional methods to minister to a thriving community. Glide hosts movie nights for prostitutes, teaches theatre to inner city children, and offers computer training for people with low incomes. They have two celebrations at Glide each Sunday with block-long lines of people waiting to get in.

The choir, known as the Glide Ensemble Choir, sings gospel, rock and freedom songs, accompanied by a rock, soul and jazz band. Their programs and celebrations operate from a simple yet profound principle. We say no to death, yes to life.

Glide is one model of congregational mission and dynamic community outreach, in your face program and celebrations, a congregation that knows itself, knows its community, and celebrates life.

Now let's turn to the Church of the Savior story, a congregation in Washington, D.C. One visitor to the church describes them this way: how can a church of only 150 members manage nearly fifty different



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ministries? Some with budgets running in the millions of dollars with assets in the tens of millions. They have an extended support family across the U.S. and they receive partner and government funding as well, and that extended family bought their own properties, not beautiful sanctuaries to worship in, but buildings needed for the poor, and homeless, to house them and hospitalize them, the influence of this intriguing family grew, the effects washing across the U.S. bringing finances and workers to help the committed core family.

So, they run a community health clinic for over 5000 members of the community, a transient medical facility for homeless men, an addiction recovery facility, traditional and long-term housing, job placement, social housing, a gathering spot restaurant in the midst of the neighbourhood, etc.

Each of these centres is also home to one of the more than fifteen worshipping communities, and they worship in communities of 20 to 50 people. It's not easy to be a member of the Church of the Savior. Internship comes before membership. As a requirement for membership, a minimum of one hour of prayer each day with an emphasis on listening to God. Plus, intercession for the community and the world, keeping a spiritual journal, planned bible study, two silent retreats each year, stewardship of money, responsible consumerism, etc. They have these requirements because they do not start anything new unless a member senses a call from God through that listening process to offer a new part of ministry. This call must be shared with others so that a core of 3 to 4 members feels the call, and commits themselves to seek to bring it to life.

I experienced the sharing of one such calling when I was there in 1999. Church of the Savior is another model of integrated congregational mission and community outreach. The worship style is much more contemplative than Glide. But the commitment to the community is just as strong. These people are just like many of us. People hungering for a way to be authentically in ministry with other people of faith and they live that commitment every day of the week.

These two examples have several things in common:

They listened carefully for God's call. They knew their community and met needs. They focused their work, they articulated their vision in a way that was both challenging and at the same time inspired commitment from the congregation. They chose different ways to integrate their worship space with the physical space for their programs. One doing programs in the same building with the sanctuary, and the other building spaces in the neighbourhood and then finding places for worship within them.

But keep in mind that they developed these programs one at a time. They lived so well what we heard read so well in Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 today. What about us here at MCC? What new thing does God want to do through us? In these ambiguous and sometimes hostile but truly exciting times are we willing to take a fresh look at who we are, at our gifts and our strengths and our limitations?



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Are we willing to take a fresh look at who our community is or might be and what our work in the midst of that community will be? Are we willing to focus and say no to some things and yes to others? Are we willing to risk for the sake of being true to God's calling?

Dr. Christopher Durra Singh said mission is not a truth affair but a love affair. Are we ready to have our passion stirred with a fresh love affair with the community around us? And with the God who loves us and calls us new into mission. The spirit is our partner in mission and it is God's mission, not ours.

I'm truly excited to be a part of this next phase of life here at MCC, however, it is an awkward time for me because Debra and I leave next Sunday for five months. So how can we test next steps together when we are away from each other? I propose the following two steps as a less than perfect possibility.

One, I'll be out at coffee hour after service. If you are intrigued by what you heard, if you felt God's call, to explore things further, come and see me at the table. We can then agree to keep in touch by email over the next few months and plan to do some more concrete explorations at some sessions during the fall.

If you're not prepared yet to be part of the explorations rest assured you can be part of the fall sessions.

Also feel free to contact me by email between now and then and we can discuss things further. The insert in the bulletin is a summary of today's talk and notes about what we can do in the fall, and also from the City of Toronto study. As you think about these possibilities, I want to close with more words from Ted Loder:

Please pray again with me.

God of history and our hearts, so much has happened to us during these whirlwind days, we have known death and birth, we've been brave and scared, we've been with people and we've been lonely, we've decided, we've waffled, we've laughed, we've cried, you know our hearts and our history and now another time begins. Oh God help us to believe in beginnings and in our beginning again, help us to make beginnings, to begin going out of our dreary minds with fresh dreams daring to make our own bold tracks in the land of now, help us to believe in beginnings, to make beginnings, to believe in beginnings, so that we may not just grow old but grow new, each day of this wild, amazing life you call us to live, with the passion of Jesus Christ, in your many names.

Amen.