

God in the City : Ontario Prayer Breakfast May 27, 2014

Today I've come to talk about the greatest idea in the history of the world. And in that call, I also bring Greetings *to our hard working Provincial Government and City of Toronto officials at this Head Table, to our elected provincial and federal members present, to the civil servants of fire, police, school and clergy who keep this city protected, distinguished guests, OPB friends, it's a honor to be with you.*

I love the stories that are represented in this room -- you are laying a track that others are going to follow. How you engage with the greatest idea in the history of the world will affect that. Passive or active, you affect people, anyone getting dressed for breakfast this early in the morning is not passive. Every one of us has a story of how we came to be in Toronto today, and sometimes we forget that it really matters. I want to share the story today of how and why I came to work in Toronto, because I think that is the reason I came to be invited here. I know we all take a lot of heat for being Toronto centric but it is what it is. Last month I enjoyed being in Saskatchewan, (how many of you have lived and worked in Sask ? I have also -- it's good for us) but last month I was in the very small community of Caronport, to attend graduation at Briercrest College and Seminary -- a school that is the economic engine of the town Caronport. And I came home and said to a colleague, boy, that is a small town. It just has a subway, that's it. And my Toronto colleague says, well, all least they can get in and out easily. And I said, no, the Subway is attached to the Husky gas bar and you can get fresh sandwiches there.

So let's just own it, that we have some issues about Toronto. (PPT 2 -- historic subway traffic) Yes it is big and wonderful -- And I want to share why I am fascinated with it, and in love with working here. I commute in on the Go Train from Burlington, I feel like a suburban Sherpa coming in with all my gear -- I don't sit up top in the train's quiet zone -- that is for the folks who think they're in the cottage up there.

Your location is actually very important for finding the spiritual realities you need in your life. There are many mysteries about God, but what we do know is that God does work in physical time, and physical space through real people. The history of religion will tell us that. Our own experiences confirm it. So where you are planted, the people, the family, the job, the physical reality of our lives, you will experience God. Embedded in our personal stories, is where the Spirit of God visits us. Like in history, like in Scripture, the stories of God are always rooted in people, places, geography and time. Always what we know of God comes to us through people and God interacting. So important we recall that God is a communicator with people.

I'd like to suggest that later you Google the Biblical book of Mark, chapter 4. And read it in The Message. The Message is an easy reading version for busy people like us, and in Mark 4 Jesus is teaching, and Jesus says, insight into God's ways is important. And Mark 4 shows how liberal God is with wanting those ways to be known. The picture we get is: God is like a farmer, generously sowing and throwing seeds out on the ground, some soil fertile, some not. Or like light-- A cover is lifted, light shines everywhere, just a small light and darkness recedes. God is patient, patient for a purpose. He puts a tiny seed into the ground, and with enough time, a huge tree results.

In spring of 2010 I was at a thoughtful moment in my working life as a journalist, when I was walking down John St, just absorbed in the bustle of the street ...[{ppt 3 up}](#) and as I crossed King, then Adelaide, and I was stopped in my tracks by the site of the Bell Media building, and eight blocks of youth who were lined up around the corner, waiting for Much Music Tickets. The cultural power of that sight caught my imagination, I knew a different story of this building. [{ppt 4 up}](#) This picture is of the Bell Media building when it was still called the Wesley Building built in 1913, by the Methodist Church of Canada, to be the Methodist Book and Publishing House, which printed Bibles for Canada. Engraved in the Wesley building's gothic architecture are books and sheaves of wheat on all of it's corners. [{ppt 5 up}](#).

I felt the Holy Spirit speak to me in that location of walking down John St in 2010. It was an invitation, a presence felt audibly in my imagination that God was asking for a media home to be created again in Toronto's downtown core. We have a staff of 12, and a Board of Directors here at tables x and x today and it's one of the stories that has shaped our life and work together. And the idea that began to grow from that walk down John St was to secure a lease for this task of Christian story telling in media at 250 Front Street, in the facilities of the CBC's Broadcast Centre. [{ppt 7 up}](#).

In 2010 we walked around and through that building, many times, and we prayed for a lease. We really wanted the chance to write out cheques to the CBC. Of course it didn't make a lot of sense in some ways, and God kept reminding me of stories.

That Missio Deo -- that great idea that God enters our physical time and space -- God reminded me of stories of how Missio deo -- God meeting us -- and sending us -- has worked in Toronto throughout the years.

I come from a modestly-sized church family or denomination that was birthed out of prayer rooms that operated in downtown Toronto. Today, there are now nearly 130,000 people meeting in over 430 Christian and Missionary Alliance churches across Canada. Seed was scattered over

100 years ago that took root and grew and impacted my life and the lives of many others. You see this story time and again in God's economy.

Consider a few of the names and stories in our city's history—where people's vision, actions, and leadership laid the tracks that we move on today.

{ppt 8 up}

GEORGE BROWN moved to Toronto from Scotland in 1843 to launch a newspaper, propelled by a vision to tell of God's work in the colonies. That became The Globe and Mail and his remarkable life that grew into political leadership and at his funeral the tributes say:

“By his pure life and conversion he commended the religion of Christ. He was sustained by his trust in God and in the blood of the Redeemer.”
God meets us on our own turf-- in our own time and space-- to bring new things to life for the future.

Also the 1840s, the first Roman Catholic Bishop in this city, Bishop Michael Power used his own savings and donations from a growing Irish Catholic immigrant community to buy a plot of land for \$3,200. (The price of prime real estate downtown has gone up a little since then!) In unity, Catholic and non-Catholic volunteers hauled away 95,000 cubic feet of dirt to excavate and lay the foundation for {ppt 9 up} what would one day become a thriving centre of religious and community life for thousands.

As they built, 40,000 new Irish Catholic emigrants were arriving, fleeing the Potato Famine in Ireland.

With the famine also came disease – Typhoid Fever-- and building program aside, Bishop Power and his priests were working in the fever sheds where the sick were housed on the shore of the city. Michael Power himself contracted Typhus and died in 1847 before seeing his vision of the Cathedral completed one year later. {ppt 10 up} Elizabeth McMaster was born in Toronto the year that Bishop Power died. {ppt 11 up} Nearly three decades later by 1875, life expectancy in Toronto wasn't much better for than it was for emigrants years before—especially for children. In fact, the mortality rate for children under age 10 represented almost half of the recorded deaths in the city at that time. Elizabeth McMaster heard a call from God and determined to do what she could to change that. She and a group of her friends were part of a Bible Study and prayer group that became known as the “Ladies Committee”. They dedicated rented an 11-room house in downtown Toronto for \$320 a year, it was “for the admission and treatment of all sick children.”

And the cold location of our winters reveal something about how Elizabeth and God worked together on this venture. The hospital archives

preserve a letter Elizabeth McMaster's wrote a heating contractor. Her letter read: "We get *our* money only as the Lord sends it, and that only in answer to believing prayer. The Lord seldom sends us a surplus, but has never left us in want for any necessary thing. We consider it right to make this statement to you *before* you commence work, that you might either work, trusting God for the money, as we do, or not at all. We'd like to hear from you by Wednesday noon"

That is the *MISSIO DEO*, the Mission of God working through us -- faith in action --, led by one Whose power is greater than our own...

Toronto's Timothy Eaton was known as our "Merchant Prince,". {ppt 12 up} When he arrived in Ontario in 1857, a religious revival was underway in Stratford area and, Timothy Eaton attended a tent meeting and heard the message of Jesus. He heard about God's love for him and the need to repent of his own sin and to be reconciled to God. He knew what religion was, but this was different. It was personal. In the middle of the meeting, he withdrew to a nearby barn and debated within himself what to do with a nagging pull that kept coming to him to give his life completely to God. When he returned, he made a confession of his need for God. It set the course of his life from then on.

Eaton moved to Toronto in 1869 and purchased a dry goods store at Queen and Yonge for \$6,500. (Acquisitions have never been so affordable—or influential!), At Christmastime Eaton's store windows were major attractions. Here's one. {ppt 13 up} He also did what today seems unthinkable. On Sundays, even when those Christmas scenes were on full display, Eaton's would pull the curtains over the store windows so no one could see the merchandise. It was a reminder to himself and to all to take a break from commerce and to think about God and not business all the time. You can imagine what he'd do with our cell phones. The closed curtains reminded him that there is a relationship with God that needed attention, time, and focus. The greatest idea in the world – that we can be reconciled to God, got full attention on Eaton's Sunday's

God's seeds sown in these different lives took root and grew in fertile Ontario soil. They each showed in their lives what happens when creativity meets faith, when their story, their location, became part of God's story.

One of the books I'm looking at is *Creativity, Inc.* by Ed Catmull, a co founder of Pixar Studios. His pitch is "The leader is often not the person driving the train. It's the person who lays down the tracks." They set the horizons of what's possible. They create the context for our imagination and inspiration.

Don't be intimidated by needing to build the next Sick Kids' Hospital or St Michael's Cathedral. You are laying down tracks that others are going to go down on their journey. Your children, your spouse, your co workers, and yes, for some in this room, you are laying down tracks that this province and great city will go down. Political leadership is the toughest job in our country, we have great esteem for you, and this breakfast is meant to say we realize your roles should be lifted to our reconciling God to give you wisdom, health, favor, and joy in your journey of service as you lay the tracks for the future.

What tracks are we laying down today for tomorrow's future? The greatest idea in history is that humanity can be reconciled to a loving God. When that happens to an individual, a person is united to a new idea – God in us. The Saviour of the world shaping our imagination. It brings hope it brings integrity, it brings self control, it brings the social capital of love for our neighbor, it puts your life straight. It brings emotional healing, it brings good gifts to our lives. God is an invitation to love.

We have a history of stories that remind us that God is always in communication with people, and real change and transformation happens as a result.

What kind of work could God do through your life?
There is work to be done.

There is salvation in Christ to be discovered.

There are wounds to heal.

A city to be built.

And I believe we have been given the power to do it.

Thank you and God bless you.