Santa J. Ono

Good morning to all of you. Thank you, Glen, for that wonderful introduction. I want to thank and salute every one of you for what you do to make Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and the world a better place. In many ways, I think Canada is a beacon for democracy and justice in the world today. The Economist says so, so it must be true! It is an honour and a responsibility, and I think that Canadians and British Columbians will really rise to that challenge.

Your Honour, thanks for being here today, and thanks to all of you for giving me the great honour of addressing you at this 51st Annual British Columbia Leadership Prayer Breakfast. I think I was four years old when the first one took place, and I am sure it wasn’t this large, so it speaks to the power of God that we are all here together today.

I was asked to give a little bit of testimony, a little bit of insight into my faith journey, and it certainly isn’t a remarkable one in any way, shape, or form. In many ways, it wasn’t meant to be. I think I owe it to God that I was able to find Jesus and I will tell you a little bit about how that came about.

I was born in Vancouver in 1962, some years after my father and mother had emigrated from Japan to North America. At the time, my father was a professor of Mathematics at UBC, along with the amazing future President of UBC, Professor Walter Gage, who was also a member of that department.

Some of you may remember him, and I know that President Gage not only took care of other faculty members in that department, but also a variety of individual students from all over the world, who were studying at UBC. This fact will resonate with my message, at the very end of my remarks.

My mother and father were not believers and did not practice any religion. From kindergarten through 12th grade, despite growing up in predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant neighbourhoods, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Baltimore after leaving Vancouver as a toddler, I had very little concept of what happened in churches. I walked past them going to school, drove past them on the way to different places, learned how to play musical instruments, but I didn’t really know what happened inside churches.

The only times we, as a family, would enter churches would be to listen to music. My father loves music, and we would go there on Christmas Eve, or to hear someone play in a church, just because that’s where the concert happened to be. I didn’t think the pews were very comfortable, but I was curious about what actually happened on Sundays, and on evenings and afternoons, that these churches, that were really nodes of activity, places where people built community.
In some ways, I was jealous of not being part of that mysterious activity happening in churches. I was curious about Easter and Christmas although I thought for the longest time that Easter was about the Easter Bunny, chocolate eggs, and baskets, and I thought that Christmas was about Santa Claus, and Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer. As a child, I was intrigued by Nativity scenes and the Christmas plays that took place in schools. But I thought that churches were community social clubs where people gathered on Sunday for coffee, and where my friends attended Boy Scouts group meetings. I was confused as to why people would get all dressed up on occasions like baptism or confirmation where, incidentally, my friends were very naughty while dressed in their Sunday best.

My first introduction to God and Jesus occurred in my freshman year, as a student at the University of Chicago. With the sudden freedom of living far away from home, and with no parental guidance, I slipped into a trap that perhaps some of you did as well. I partied hard and frequently drank too much on Friday nights and weekends. Indeed, I think that part of my binge drinking had to do with a deep dissatisfaction with my life deep inside my soul—maybe a lack of a reference point, a lack of a spiritual anchor. However, I didn’t know it at the time.

There was one particularly risky evening, when I had had far too much to drink, and was hanging from an open windowsill on the 5th floor of my residence hall, on a very cold night in Chicago. I don’t remember much about that evening other than that two of my friends rescued me from the windowsill and helped me get into bed. It was a very difficult night and they stayed by my side the entire time to ensure that I made it through. I am sure that many of you have some friends to whom you owe your lives.

These two friends were very active in church on campus and started to take me with them to church services. We went to Bond chapel, a Catholic chapel, and to Rockefeller Church, the large church on the University of Chicago campus. They took me to Inter-Varsity groups, both large and small. They also took me back home to their suburbs to attend their churches, to meet with their ministers and mingle with their home congregations. In particular, they took me to their families for some family love, because they thought that I was lost.

I remember feeling very special when I entered these churches. I felt chills down my spine as I knelt down to pray, not understanding what that meant. Although I had virtually no knowledge of the Bible, there was something about simply being in those churches that moved me as I had never been moved before.

After graduating from the University of Chicago, I made my way back to Canada to be a graduate student in Experimental Medicine at McGill University. My girlfriend from Chicago was meant to join me in Montreal but she never ended up doing so, and I quickly spiralled into a deep depression. I began drinking again, heavily, and had suicidal thoughts.

Fortunately, I encountered a fellow graduate student working in the Collaborator’s Laboratory at the Royal Victoria Hospital. She played the piano. I played the cello. The pianist’s name was Wendy Yip. Sometime later we would start dating, and eventually she became my wife.

Wendy took me to her church. I was a doubtful, smart aleck non-believer when I accompanied her to church, even though I had already these feelings, these chills down my back whenever I entered a church. We would spend hours talking about why I had problems believing in God and Jesus. I had been educated as a scientist, to look for proof, and I could see no proof of the existence of God or Jesus. After many conversations, and my attendance at a Sunday School with 11-year- old kids, I started to understand the concept of faith, and the persuasiveness of the Bible and the power of those who believed, as evidence that there must be a God.
A particular pastor, Lloyd Pierce, of Westmount Baptist Church, worked with me and my faith emerged and grew stronger day by day. I’ll never forget the day I was baptized in Westmount Baptist Church, on a glorious, sunny Easter Day. Although my attendance at church would be variable, I became an even more committed Christian once my first daughter was born in Boston, Massachusetts. I started to serve as an acolyte at Trinity Church, an Anglican church, and eventually was promoted to lay Eucharistic minister. I was incredibly moved to carry the cross, as a crucifer, and to serve during normal services, weddings, funerals, and to bring bread and wine to those believers in that congregation. I would continue to do the same in England, and in Cincinnati, Ohio.

There was a pivotal moment when I was a Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs at Emery University in Atlanta. Emery was originally a Methodist university but is now a secular, multi-faith university. I discussed the issue of faith with then-president of the university, Jim Wagner, and also with a professor that I admired greatly, Tom Flynn, a Catholic priest. President Wagner was relatively open about his faith (he is a Presbyterian) but he reminded me that, as a senior administrator, it was important for me to respect and support staff, faculty, and students of every faith, as well as those who had not yet decided to believe.

Professor Flynn, on the other hand, was different. Although he was a Catholic priest, he was extremely discreet about letting people know about his faith. He encouraged me to hide my Christianity and to be, as he said, “a stealth Christian.” And this from a Catholic priest! Partly, this was a safeguard against favouring one faith over another in a multi-faith institution. Partly, it was to protect oneself from the eventual, and sometimes real, criticism and bias from other secular or atheist professors who don’t believe there is any place for faith in the academy.

After more than a year of considering the possible options, I made a decision not to be a “stealth Christian.” In fact, I decided to immerse myself in supporting students of all faiths at Emery University. I continued this practice at the University of Cincinnati, and now at UBC.

At Emery, I was recognized as a Christian by local representatives of Inter-Varsity and asked both to sit on a local board, and to raise money for Inter-Varsity. I accepted that request, gladly. I was also asked by the students themselves to serve as a faculty advisor to their chapter. My engagement with Inter-Varsity grew, and I would eventually be asked by Alex Hill, the immediate Past-President of Inter-Varsity USA, to be a member of the National Board of Trustees for Inter-Varsity. He was amazed that I would make time to travel to the board meetings around the country despite my having a heavy administrative role.

Since moving to UBC, I have maintained my approach in supporting faculty, students, and staff in whatever faith they might practice, and regardless of whether they are believers or not. I also do not hide my Christianity and, occasionally, I pray for students at large student events such as Chapel at the Chan Centre at UBC where over 1,300 believers come together each semester. It’s powerful. It’s amazing. It’s a testimony to God.

Let me thank you again for inviting me to address the British Columbia Leadership Prayer Breakfast. It is an enormous honour for anyone, but especially for someone like me, who probably wasn’t meant to be up here as a Christian; someone who started with no concept at all about God or Jesus or what happens within churches. I think what I have learned in my journey is that God is everywhere, not only in those churches, not only here today, but God is everywhere, wherever two or more are gathered.

I hope that God will use me at UBC, in Vancouver, in British Columbia, and in Canada to spread the good news. More importantly, I hope that my engagement will, for at least for some students, be a transformative moment that will help them find Christ, just as two friends helped me, throughout the night, to find Christ.
when I was a student at the University of Chicago. You see, I was a lost sheep when I first entered university.

Could you please join me in this short prayer:

Dear heavenly Father, thank you for bringing me back home to Vancouver. Thank you for connecting me when I was a lost sheep early in my life.

Thanks for bringing me in contact with my friends, during university, and my wife-to-be, in graduate school.

Thanks for accepting me, despite my many, manifold flaws.

Dear God, please use me as your servant to spread the good news, and to support those who seek you.

And God, I pray that you hear the many voices of young people, and more established people, who cry out to you on a daily basis, both aloud, and perhaps more profoundly, silently, to be saved.

Dear God, let us all remember Matthew 9, verses 36-38: “But when he saw the multitude, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered like sheep having no shepherd. And he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’”

Dear God, we praise you today for bringing together over 1000 labourers, who will go out, across the city, across this beautiful province, with compassion, as shepherds of lost sheep everywhere, to bring them to you for your love and salvation, to be part of your glorious kingdom.

We pray for all of our brothers and sisters, in Jesus’ name. Amen.