



LESSONS for LIFE

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YOUR LOVE IS AMAZING
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You know at seminary they teach clergy about the importance of making sure that sermons are not just theory, but that they also come out of your own experience. And yet they caution preachers, not to work out their own stuff in the sermon. I'm not sure tonight, if I'm on the first end or the second end, so you may have to bear with me a little bit more this evening.

I have a first cousin named Scott Robinson, who lived in Scarborough. Scott, on January the 10th celebrated his 36th birthday. Scott had muscular dystrophy and quite advanced, in that, and unable to feed himself and to care for many of the things that some folk take for granted. And his family and his caregivers would put him to bed at night. It took many different pillows put in many different places to help him to feel comfortable and to be able to rest and just to lay there and experience sleep. And just before the 9th of January, my sister Nancy sent me an email saying 'Brent, Scott's birthday's tomorrow, why don't you call and wish him a happy birthday.' I got busy and I didn't do it until a couple days later and I called him and got him on the phone and said 'Sorry Scott, I didn't get to you on your birthday, but I hope your birthday went well. How are you?' And he said 'Oh I'm fine.' And Scott's answer was always, 'Oh I'm fine. How are you?' And so we talked and I said I have to go away to some meetings in Fort Lauderdale, but when I come back on Monday, last Monday, whatever that date was, I said, 'how about I give you a call and maybe you and I and John can have dinner together and connect.' He said 'I'd like that.' So I took out my Blackberry and I put in an entry for last Monday to call Scott and to invite him to dinner. And while I was away my sister sent me another email to say that Scott had taken ill; that his lung had collapsed and that he had had a mild heart attack and that he was in the hospital and it didn't look good. And then the next day he's looking better and then the next day he's not looking good. And it was going downhill and his family really closed in around themselves. His mum and dad and sister live in Burlington and Scott lived in Scarborough and they were always pretty angry with mainly our side of the family because there's a lot of us in Peterborough and the Maritimes and almost no one had kept any contact with Scott and so they closed down. The family was only talking to my sister and she was keeping everybody else informed. So when my sister emailed to say Scott was declining I emailed, I called, I left messages on their home machine in Burlington, no cell number. I said to my sister, 'When they call again tell them I want to reach them, I want to be helpful, I want to be supportive', so finally my aunt called and... well first of all, I called every hospital that had anything to do with Scarborough until I traced them down and then I got my uncle and I said 'Please know I am here.' And he said 'Well, I'll tell you aunt.' And eh, so then finally we connected, last Monday, and I said, 'Shirley would like me to come over?' And she said 'Please, if you'd like to, please.' Monday is my day off and folks know I don't do anything church on Monday... ever. But I got my clergy shirt on and dressed up and I went out to Scarborough to the hospital and I went in and Scott was laying there all hooked up to not a lot of stuff, but a little stuff, and my aunt Shirley is a nurse and she said that the doctors had said there was no hope, that Scott's whole system would shut down and so there was to be no more treatment. There had been none since Saturday, no intravenous, no water, no food, since Saturday. And so basically he was starving to death. And Shirley, my aunt, and my cousin Shannon were sitting there and we talked and we prayed together and they asked all kinds of questions and we had a really wonderful time and I took out some anointing oil and together we anointed Scott and prayed with him, although he was totally in a coma by this time. And we sat and laughed and cried and had a wonderful, wonderful time together. And I left. And Scott died just a few hours later than night. And then they called my sister, to get the message out to everyone. She



LESSONS for LIFE

sent out an email. In the email she said, 'and the family really want to express their thanks to Brent for coming to visit and how helpful that was and he seemed to have all the right words and his prayers were really meaningful.' But I left feeling like I'd let Scott down. There he had been in Scarborough for all these years and I had been busy for all these years. And I realized that other than probably Brian Brennie, that I have not spent much time in friendships. Family or non family. Brian and his partner and John and I go for dinner about every Friday or Saturday night, every week. And in other than that friendship, I've put very little energy into friendships. I've put all of my energy into the church, occasionally some into my relationship with my partner, but most into the church. So Scott wasn't an exception really, but Scott needed me. So how do I deal with that guilt? What do I learn from that situation? For me, I believe in the old Christian formula of confession, repentance and accepting forgiveness. So I spent some time talking to God and to Scott, after his passing, expressing my apology for not being there, and hoping to learn some lessons from that situation. And then being able to forgive myself, because I have to practice what I preach and that can be a bitch sometimes, excuse my language.

So I wanted to talk a little bit tonight about death's tough questions. Because also this week I've spent some time visiting a couple members of our church who were close friends. I don't do a lot of pastoral care. I can't, I'm just so crazy busy and so I rely on the deacons mainly to do the pastoral care of our church. But there a couple of folks who are quite close to me who are also members of the congregation and this week I wanted to go see them. I didn't want to be too busy this week. So I met with the two of them individually and they both had some questions around death and dying. And one of them, his main question was, 'Brent, I was raised a Catholic, but I stopped going to church when I was 12. But now all of sudden, since I have this thing happening to me, all this stuff is coming back. So I have a question for you. "Is God punishing me for something? Because of my cancer?"' And I said 'No, a God of unconditional love is not that mean and not that vindictive even if the church is. That God would never punish you and God never punishes groups of people. God loves you. Sometimes when we pray I believe God intervenes and heals. I've seen it; I've experienced it. Sometimes when we pray God doesn't intervene. I don't understand why, but I trust in God's wisdom and God's choices. I'll still pray for healing and sometimes the healing will result and sometimes it doesn't. But I do not believe God punishes.' And sitting with my aunt Shirley and my cousin Shannon, and looking at Scott starving to death, one of death's tough questions: What about euthanasia? What is humane to let him starve to death? Or would it have been more humane to have some active intervention in the process? I have been with families in similar situations where the families have said to the doctors, 'Could we give more morphine please, could we give more morphine please?' And that conversation would continue and everyone knew what was being asked and no one said the official words but action was taken so the life would end humanely. It's a tough question.

Did Scott's disability, cause me to be too busy even more than I was? Was his disability a barrier for me in forming a deeper relationship with Scott? A tough question I had to ask and examine. What comes first? Family and friends? Or calling or job or career? Will we meet again? Shirley and Shannon and I talked about the day they would meet Scott again and how after he passed on he would meet our other relatives, particularly Shirley's mum, my grandmother and how she would probably want to have a game of cards with Scott and we talked to Scott to get ready 'cos she'd probably want to cheat as much up there as she did down here (laughter). It's my firm, absolute belief and conviction that we will meet again with those who have gone on before us. Will we carry our disabilities with us or will we be freed from them? Is Scott now running and feeling the breeze against his face or is he not? I believe there is a holiness in not knowing. We don't have to have the answers. We don't have to have the proof. We may think this, or we may think that but that we can experience a holiness and a trust and a peace rested in the holy, in the divine, in spirit.



LESSONS for LIFE

Today my sister told me that my mum's health is declining quite rapidly. That she is no longer able to walk even with the help she has. She has advanced Alzheimer's and her weight is dropping dramatically. She is forgetting, her body is forgetting how to walk and maybe forgetting how to digest food and swallow. There was a certain man who was ill. His name was Lazarus of Bethany. With the aid of Mary and his sister, and her sister, Martha they sent word to Jesus, Mary and Martha, and said 'Jesus, Lazarus, whom you love is ill.' Now Jesus, loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, so when Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed there two days longer. Why Jesus, did you not go? Why did you not intervene when Lazarus was still alive? So when Jesus finally came and found that Lazarus had been in the tomb now four days, and as Jesus was coming Martha heard that he was near by and she went and met him and she said 'Jesus, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now you can say the word.' Jesus got closer and Mary heard that he was near by and she went out to Jesus and she said 'Jesus if you had been here my brother would not have died.' And when Jesus saw her weeping and the religious leaders who came with her also weeping, Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and crumbled and Jesus said 'Where have you laid him?' And they said 'Come and see' and Jesus wept. So the religious leaders said, 'See how he loved him' But some of them said 'Could not he, who opened the eyes of the blind have kept this man from dying?' Martha said 'Why, Jesus?' Mary said 'Why, Jesus?' And the religious leaders said 'Why, Jesus? You could have kept him from dying.'

I believe that death is the ultimate healer, that all of our ultimate healing comes through death. Some of us will experience healing in a variety of forms on this earth, in our own lives or the lives of others. Some of us will pray and pray and pray for that healing. For those who are close to us. Some of us will see it, experience it and rejoice. And others will sit by the bedside and hold vigil while those close to us die. Jesus if you had been here, you could have said the word and he or she would be healed. We don't know the rest of the story. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. But our faith says, Jesus you can still say the word and healing can still come. Now the gospel records, only one of the gospels, records that Jesus went then to the graveside and he called Lazarus to come out of the grave. And they said to him 'Hey, be careful, he stinks. He's been dead for a while here.' And Jesus said 'Lazarus come forward.' Did that happen in fact? Don't know. It seems unusual but the other three gospel's writers never even mentioned it. But if it's a metaphor for a greater truth, then that metaphor says to us that out of death comes new life. That metaphor says to us that those who've gone us before us and even when we face our own time of passage, that we can face it with confidence, trusting that it will be ok, trusting that we can walk through that Valley of Death, that we can leave behind us those things that hold us back. In his younger years, Scott was an avowed atheist and proudly so, he would tell folks. Then his body got weaker, he decided that he needed a pacemaker a couple of years ago. So Scott had to go through the operation of getting a pacemaker installed. And during that operation something happened to Scott. He saw himself hovering over the operating table, observing everything that was happening. And part way through the operation his heart stopped and he experienced himself going through a tunnel towards the light and when he got through that tunnel to the other end of the light he met God, this avowed atheist met God. And God said to Scott 'It's not your time yet, you have to go back.' And so Scott came back. And for the last two years Scott lived his life with an amazing peace about death that was a beautiful, beautiful experience for him.

Yeah, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. You spread a table before me in the presence of my enemy. You anoint my head with oil and my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the House of my God forever.

Scott, I wish you well on that journey. I hope by now you've had a chance to talk to my dead. I hope Gram didn't cheat in the card game. And I hope this new life, this new beginning that you are now experiencing, will



LESSONS for LIFE

give you joy and peace and I look forward to the day and hold on to the promise when I will see you again.
Thank you for the lessons you have taught me, in both your living and your dying.

Amen.