



## LESSONS for LIFE

**GOOD FRIDAY March 21, 2008 7:00 p.m.**

**PUTTING IT DOWN**

**Rev. Brent Hawkes, C.M.**

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In many churches the main part of the Good Friday service is the reading of the Passion. I think this evening we've not only heard the words but we have experienced them in a new way with the sounds that make it real and made the words come alive for us. About two thousand years ago a young teacher, a prophet, the Prince of Peace was put to death because of his religious teachings and the political consequences. In the 1940s the Holocaust; forty-eight years ago today, 1960, Sharpeville, South Africa, two thousand unarmed Africans demonstrated peacefully against apartheid. Sixty-nine were killed. International attention focused on the evil of apartheid and today is the international day for the elimination of racial discrimination as designated by the United Nations to remember Sharpeville.

I keep wondering what Jesus would say today. I keep wondering what kind of a sermon he would give if he was addressing a Good Friday service, looking back over history, looking at his followers, how we had tried to remember him, the good we have done in his name and the evil perpetuated in his name. I wonder what kind of a sermon he would give to us talking about those events and the resulting history since then. I think he would try to correct some misunderstandings. I think he would try to say – with a choking voice – how he got it so wrong! How could we ever believe that a God of love would require his death? How could we ever think that a loving God would require someone to pay a price; that God was so quick and so willing to forgive sins and did not require a penalty or a price. I think he would say that his life was taken not because God required it but because change necessitated it. I believe Jesus would say that his death was the gateway to transformation for him. He had said previously that *I must leave you physically so that I can be with you in spirit*. I think Jesus would address us by condemning the anti-Semitism that's arisen as people have misunderstood how and why he died.

I recall a young Jewish man who once told me how his grandparents were terrified of Good Friday; that when they were young they would hide at home on that day because Christians were so angry after coming out of their Good Friday service that those who were known to be Jewish were in jeopardy of being taunted or beaten up on that day because these "good Christians" got it wrong. The Jewish faith, as has been said, was Jesus' faith. It was the tradition he grew up in, that gave him his strength and his relationship with God, his compassion for others. It wasn't the Jews who killed Jesus. Religious bigotry, religious fundamentalism and political opportunism I think Jesus might say. I'd rather be preaching and sharing in a synagogue than in some of the churches today. I believe Jesus would also talk to us about our situation, each one of us; how each one of us must also let go of some things if we are to experience new life. I think he'd talk to us about how fear keeps us from letting go. Fear paralyzes us. Jesus wasn't afraid to go to Jerusalem even though he'd been threatened, even though he probably knew what was going to happen. Death did not make him afraid because he knew that ultimately things would be okay. He knew that death was not an ending but death was a gateway, a transformation into a new existence. Jesus let go of his life in order to move into what could be. Jesus who was known as the Prince of Peace who talked about *My peace I give to you*. But his death at the hands of religious fundamentalism and political opportunism was so shocking in his day and echoes down through the centuries that his death should shock us about the results that can come from religious bigotry, fundamentalism, violence, the taking of human life.



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I think Jesus would talk to us about how to grieve a loss, knowing that the people in front of him – many would have lost a friend or relative over the past few days or would do so in the coming months, and as we think of death I think he would talk to us about grieving, about the importance of grieving a loss in order to embrace the change; that grieving is a natural and important part of saying goodbye and saying hello to what then can be. I think he would talk to us about lessons that can be learned about letting go, about letting go of what needs to die in our lives. If he was in the middle of a sermon series on Happiness Now he might talk to us about the importance of letting go of our vision as victim and instead taking up our power. *My peace I give to you* he said; but he also said, *I do not want you to be people of timidity or fear but people of power and love and self-control*; about taking responsibility for our lives and our world and for each other. I think he would talk to us about letting go of our guilt and our judgment and instead taking up our self-talk about gratitude and about goodness and about things that are lovely and pure and of good reputation. I think he would talk to us about giving up our resentments and taking up forgiveness; that forgiveness is the only way to heal our world. I think he would talk to us about giving up our guilt and our shame and taking up the ability to learn lessons from our mistakes, to not wallow in the guilt but instead to say, *What can I learn from this? What are the lessons for me here?* I think Jesus would challenge us to let go of our religious baggage and instead take up our religious wings for I believe that Jesus felt that religion was about empowering and lifting us up, encouraging us in the midst of difficult times; that coming to synagogue and coming to church was about being empowered and encouraged to make the world a better place; to believe that tomorrow will be different and will be better; to pick up your religious wings to help you to be able to soar above the difficulties experiencing the pain but at the same time knowing that joy will come in the morning

I think Jesus would talk about a faith-based life and not a fear-based life; about making decisions with confidence that you and God can handle anything; about making decisions in your life trusting that things will be okay and not being afraid to risk or try again. Two thousand years ago he said these things, to his disciples and to thousands of people. What have we learned in two thousand years? The Holocaust; Sharpeville. Today we grieve over the past. We grieve over his death; we grieve over what has been done and said in his name! And today we also hear him calling to us not only to grieve but also to learn. Never again, never again. To learn the lessons from the past, to learn the lessons from his life well lived and from the messages that he taught and to learn the messages from his death. Yes, we have those moments of, *My God, my God why have you forsaken me?* I have had some of those moments this week, but just as Jesus quickly moved from those words to the words, *Into your hands God I commend my spirit.* We too can move out of those places of despair and the feeling of being forsaken and we too can move into those places of faith and trust in God if we will let go and if we will pick up the goodness around us and within us; the knowledge of God's presence within us and around us and in those near to us, and as we hear the sounds of crucifixion and judgment may we also hear the sounds of his voice calling us, urging us to learn the lessons from the past: *John, take her as your mother. Mary, take him as your son.* Even on the cross he cared about others around him. May we learn to care as much and maybe the sermon Jesus might preach next year might say to us, *Well done, good and faithful servants. You heard the message. You learned the lesson. As my disciples you preached the good news and they knew that you were my followers by the way that you loved each other.* And he would be more and more confident to trust you to do his work.

Amen.