



LESSONS for LIFE

April 27, 2008, 11:00 a.m.

A Surprising Doorway

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SACRED READINGS

Lesson: 1 Peter 3: 13-14

Gospel: John 14: 15-20

A woman who has had a challenging life finally meets a wonderful man. They get married. He suddenly becomes ill and will probably be in hospital the rest of his life unable to speak or move. She is devastated. A young black woman works very hard to put herself through university and reach her dream of becoming a lawyer. She achieves her goal, gets hired by a major law firm only to come to understand that they will never give her any big cases. She questions whether it was worth it. A young clergy man in his mid-thirties returns to his home church rejoins the staff and is excited about what he will be able to accomplish only to be diagnosed with terminal cancer. The dream is shattered. A gutsy, elderly activist works hard her whole life, looking forward to retirement so that she can be a full time activist more able to often picket arms manufacturers. She has a twinkle in her eye as she talks about "stirring things up" only to be diagnosed with cancer within one month of her retirement and to die one month later. A family find their young son dead in bed. A woman's partner is diagnosed with breast cancer and she will lose her second partner. A man is fired from a job he loves when he is unjustly accused of actions he did not commit. Office politics win again. A young activist in Jamaica has to leave his country behind because of threats, his partner behind, his family behind, his friends behind. A relationship of ten years ends suddenly when a person is informed their partner no longer wants to be with them. These are all true stories. Most of them involve people in this congregation. There are other painful ones. There are many less devastating ones yet still painful.

Most people will experience one or more crisis in their own lives. Yet most people of faith don't know how to experience those crises creatively. Crises can become holy beginnings if we will allow them. Yes, awful things happen. And sometimes when they happen we may feel that we have no way out of the pain, no way out of the despair. It feels like we are stuck in a room with no way out. This morning I want to talk about some surprising doorways out of those situations.

I am not one who says, "Oh, it is God's will." I do not believe that the awful circumstances you face are the will of God. I am not one who says that you should spend a lot of time asking why. Many cases we do not know why these things happen. Instead of asking why there is another doorway out of the situation. I put my energy into other questions instead of the why questions. Questions like; what can we learn here? What do we do now? How can we help each other in the midst of this crisis? Not stay stuck in why, move into other questions.

One question that has become a very powerful and new doorway for me, I have found it to be powerful and a surprising way out and, even more importantly, I have found it to be a way to come out of a difficult situation a stronger person, a more real person, a more deeply connected person, a more spiritually enriched person than I ever was before the problem or before the challenge came.



LESSONS for LIFE

But before I speak about this question, please remember what I said earlier that I do not believe God causes the problem. However, the question is important and it is this: God, what are the lessons that I can learn right here in the midst of the difficulty?

Here I draw from an amazing book, When the Heart Waits by Sue Monk Kidd. I highly, highly recommend this book. We all want to experience transformation in our lives. We all want to be transformed from our struggling selves to a more confident self. We want to be transformed from our anxious, fearful, worrying selves (that's me) to our spiritually strong selves. We all want to be able to weather the storms of life and to maintain our sense of, our essence of love and peace and joy that *nothing* can take away. However, we make a fatal mistake. We want to skip a very important phase in the transformation process. And because we skip this phase that I am going to talk about we remain stuck. We want to skip too quickly out of the pain, too quickly out of the difficult place. We fail to learn the lessons that can come only from those places.

Sue Kidd, in her book, likens this to the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. She says that transformation only occurs by remaining in the cocoon. She likens difficulties and pain in our lives to the cocoon. And she says that there is a very strong case that the painful places are crucial to our transformation, that this is supported by scripture, by Christian tradition and by developmental psychology. We must die to the old self in order for the new to be born. The challenge is that most of us want to run away from pain as fast as we can and yet Isaiah 31 says those who wait upon God will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings as eagles. They will run and not be weary. They will walk and not faint. Too often we fail to wait and we lose the opportunity to gain those wings, the opportunity to run and not grow weary.

Psalm 46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God." Wait. Be still. God says in the scriptures, "My strength is perfected in weakness." The difficult places, the painful places, the weak places are where God's strength is perfected. And yet, we don't want to wait. We don't want to be still. We want to run away from the weakness and the pain as fast as possible. We break up from a relationship. Instead of staying in that place for a while to learn what we need to learn, to go deeper, we run into the next relationship. We experience deep sorrow in our lives and instead of living in that sorrow experiencing the lessons that are only there we medicate ourselves to avoid the sorrow.

In the life of Jesus there was this balance between waiting on God, being in the stillness and living out of the strength that comes from waiting, a balance between stillness and powerful activity. And it is in the cocoon, in the in between places where growth comes. Yet most of us have become quickoholics. Most of us want to quickly move through situations, quickly get around difficulties. You know sometimes people will come to me and they will say, "Brent, something you said in church this morning made me very uncomfortable." And my response really should be, "Thank you. I'm so pleased." But they don't mean that. What they're saying is, it made me uncomfortable and so therefore I don't want you to do that again because I don't want to be uncomfortable. But it is in those very places of pain or suffering or difficulty or being uncomfortable that are the opportunities for us to grow.

If you have a remote control for your television set and TEVO or VCR or whatever they're called nowadays the most favourite button on the remote is Fast Forward. And yet, the most important button is the Pause button. And pause doesn't mean doing "nothing." Pause is when you allow your soul to grow up. Rushing through the difficulties inhibits your soul's ability to grow up. Ghandi



LESSONS for LIFE

said, "There is more to life than increasing its speed." And Sue Monk Kidd says, "Pain won't kill you, but running away from it might."

I am not one who spends a lot of time in prayer asking God to change circumstances. Now that may surprise you or shock you. Yes, I will name to God things I'd like to see different, but I don't spend a lot of time there. Now, excuse my sports analogy, but if you think of the game of baseball when you are up to bat, when you are at home plate when it is your turn, the objective is to get on base. Maybe you'll get a walk. Maybe a pitch will hit you. Maybe you'll get a base hit or a double or a triple or even a home run. But very small percentage of times at bat will you actually get a home run. And anyone who goes up expecting and trying for a home run every time at bat will most likely strike out and not have a very good average and not be around very long. And yet most of us in our prayer lives pray just like we only want a home run or nothing at all. We pray for God to change the circumstance or we won't be satisfied. It's like it's a home run or nothing. Now the difficulty there is, if we don't get that home run, that changed circumstance, then we feel like we're not faithful enough, we're not praying hard enough, we're not holy enough. Or worse, we blame God and we give up on God. It's like there's an opportunity to board the train to freedom and we become hopeless and we stand on the side and watch that train go by. Yes, awful things will happen. And when we step up to the plate we will be disappointed sometimes. And there will be disasters sometimes. And yet, if you ask God only to change the circumstances, then I think we fail to learn the lessons and we fail instead to make the main focus instead of God changing the circumstances to make the main focus God's strength and presence with us.

You know, over the years I have prayed many times and I have heard many others of you pray for God to change circumstances. When someone is diagnosed with terminal cancer, when someone faces a very difficult situation yes we want to name to God, "God please take the cancer away." And yet, it has been my experience that in a very, very, very small number of cases do those circumstances actually get changed. And frankly in that small numbers of cases whether it is 1 in 500, or 1 in a 1000, or 1 in 5000 there are then many folks who are disappointed in their own praying or are disappointed in God. We are not a church that will settle for trite answers. And the difficulty is, most of the Christian Church has settled for trite answers and people are becoming disillusioned at why God doesn't act. Becoming disillusioned about why God didn't change the circumstances, become disillusioned that there was no home run.

What is your picture of God? I think we need to see God less as a rescuer and more as a midwife. Less as one who will lift us out of the circumstances, change the circumstances and see God more as one who wills to birth new life within us in the midst of the pain. Instead of praying for God to change the circumstances, yes name it to God, but move then into, "God, I need You to walk with me through this. God, I need You to help me to become aware of Your presence all the time. I need to connect to You God and to connect to Your strength. God help me to remember the peace that passes all understanding. Help me to remember the love that You have for me right now and the love that surrounds me in the midst of the difficulty. Help me to remember that joy that no one and that nothing can take away. Help me to remember the blessings around me and the wonderful gift that every day of life is."

There is a surprising doorway out of situations. It's always there for us, but it requires of us to not too quickly run away from the situation. It requires of us to wait and to be still and to let the God within us slowly and quietly emerge, to lead us. It requires of us to trust that the God who loves us



LESSONS for LIFE

will lead us out of the situation in due time. It's a surprising doorway and in the midst of the difficult time to access it we need to pause and to wait and to listen and to let God draw us deeper spiritually for it is in the pain and in the difficulty that our soul can actually grow up. Sue Monk Kidd says, "Let the tomb become a womb where birth can occur." And if we run out of the tomb too soon we will not experience that transformation into the womb.

Yes, difficult, difficult things will happen. And while the heart weeps for what is lost, it is also possible for the spirit in you to rejoice in what it has found. While the heart weeps at the loss of a loved one, the spirit within you at the same time can rejoice that that person was in your life, that you knew them. While the heart weeps when a dream has been shattered, the spirit within you at the same time can rejoice in the wonder of the experience and the joy of being able to live at least part of the dream, the very presence of God in you. We need to pause. We need to be still. We need to let that presence of God emerge and then immerse us. We often run too quickly. We need to slow, be still and know that I am God.

Let us spend a few moments in quiet reflection.

Amen