



LESSONS for LIFE

MARCH 1, 2009 11:00 a.m.
8 LIFE CHANGING MESSAGES FROM JESUS
FROM BLAME TO LESSON
Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: LUKE 9: 59 - 62

Gospel: JOHN 9: 1 - 3

Typically during the season of Lent this Sunday, Palm Sunday, through Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we do a sermon series which is often a reflective series in which we're asked to take a look at our lives: things we do, things we need to change, take a look inside; and we're going to do that again this year. However, I'm going to do a little bit of a change this year and what I've decided to do is to take a look at the full set of teachings of Jesus. So I went through all of the gospels and all the earlier books of the New Testament and took a look at all the stories, the parables, teachings and sayings of Jesus and I pulled out of them eight that I think are the keys to us changing our lives. Eight of the most important, if you will, lessons in the full group of teachings of Jesus. Any one of these, I think, can change our lives. The eight of them together can transform our lives and so I encourage you during this season to be open to these lessons. What I'm going to do is that in the mornings I will be preaching the lessons and in the evening services I will be doing the opening Sunday – tonight – and the closing Sunday; but in between some other folks are going to give some additional perspectives on the lessons on the same theme but from a different perspective; so again, I would encourage you to come back in the evenings to be able to hear a similar lesson from a different perspective.

The first lesson: In the gospel that I shared with you this morning, in fact during this series the two readings will always be two gospel readings – which is unusual for us – so we're really going to have our minds stayed on Jesus during this season of Lent. In the gospel reading I shared with you this morning Jesus is walking along with the disciples and the disciples noticed a man who was blind and who'd been blind from birth and they say to Jesus, "Why is this man blind? Who's at fault here? Who should we blame for this?" So often in our lives incidents happen; things happen in our lives that can cause us pain or discomfort. Things can happen in our lives that can change the course of our lives and often times those incidents can cause us deep, deep pain and a deep sense of loss and as that happens in our lives it could be something where a loved one dies – either suddenly or even if we're preparing for it and know that it's coming – the pain is still there. Sometimes it could be a case where a loved one gets an illness and we care so much for them and want to help them and we feel lost and not being able to give the support we would like or be able to fix it. Sometimes maybe it's because of a natural disaster that happens in our world – a tsunami, a hurricane or a plane crash. I want you to hear me in this sermon today that I'm in no way diminishing the incident. I'm not at all diminishing the pain that the incident causes us or others around us and we know that for all of us there will be many of these, right? There will be many of these incidents that we will face as people around us die or as pain enters into their lives. It is natural when this happens to begin by asking why; it's a natural question that comes to mind.

Jesus was asked – why is this man blind? Why has he been blind from birth? The temptation, however, is to move into blame. Who can we blame for this? Who's at fault here? We might blame ourselves for



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a mistake that has been made and we've caused it. We might blame people around us; why did they do that to us? Or we might blame God: God, why did you allow this to happen? The challenge is that (a) the blame doesn't take us any place and indeed blame can cause us to get stuck in a situation. Now I want to use an example: divorce or separation in a relationship. It's been my experience over the years that separation in a relationship, especially for the party that didn't want it to happen, is one of the most painful experiences ever to go through and because of the pain of the incident, the situation, people move very quickly into blame: blaming themselves for a mistake they made; blaming themselves for not doing something differently or blaming the other person for how that person treated them and getting stuck there is common. The difficulty with asking the question 'why'? moving into blame – who caused this? – leads to anger and guilt and resentment. It leads to us closing down. It leads to us often moving away from God because we blame God for allowing it to happen. When we move into that place of blame and when we stay there we often lose the focus of where our energy should go.

So this morning I'm going to ask you that as those incidents happen, or have happened in your life, that instead of going to the 'why' and the blame place, the way to move past that is first of all to grieve well; to stop in the midst of the pain or the incident and to grieve well. And often we don't grieve well and therefore that leaves us with scars in our lives. Often the incident will haunt us for a long, long time and in some people's lives they are thrown off for the rest of their life because of an incident and the failure to grieve well; and so that incident then becomes a stumbling block for them for the rest of their lives.

In order to grieve well we have to acknowledge the pain and acknowledge the feelings we are experiencing. We need to stop and spend some time there. A couple of years ago a family in our congregation experienced a miscarriage and some people around them made comments like, "Oh well, you can always have another baby," and "Oh well, you're young," when what that family needed was the support to grieve well; to stop, to not move past that but to stay in that situation for awhile and to grieve the loss. Sometimes when people lose a pet – how often do people say, "Oh well, you can go to the Humane Society and get another one." "You can always ..." No. We need to stop in the midst of that loss. We need to be able to express and to feel the pain and the loss of it instead of jumping over it, moving past it to be able to stop and spend some time there to grieve well and if we do the grieving well that will help the healing come.

In that first gospel reading – it sounded harsh this morning, didn't it – and this week Brian and I were talking about it and in that gospel reading when someone wanted to follow Jesus and they said, "First I have to go and bury my dad" and Jesus said, *Let the dead bury their dead*. That sounds really harsh. And someone else says, "I want to follow you Jesus but first I want to go home and say goodbye to my family." And Jesus said, *Anyone who looks back is not fit for the realm of God*. That sounds harsh. It wouldn't have sounded harsh to the people who heard it. It didn't sound harsh to the disciple who wrote it down and included it into the gospel. If it had sounded harsh they wouldn't have included it because it would have made Jesus look bad. It didn't sound harsh because they knew that Jesus talked in metaphor. They knew it wasn't to be taken literally and so what Jesus was saying was *Yes, I understand that you want to go back to those places and to those individuals that you love who have died – but it's also important to move forward and not stay stuck in the death*. Jesus said, *I understand that you want to say goodbye to your family and keeping in touch with your family of birth is important but there comes a time when you too must live your life and move forward in the living of your life*; and they understood that that was what he meant, that he was talking in a sense about metaphor. Experiencing the incident, grieving the loss and then being able to move into what are the lessons that I can learn here. I remember years ago when I broke up with my first partner – many years ago – and



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the woman in whose house I was renting a room was a lesbian and a grandmother and she'd just had her first lesbian relationship and she'd broken up. It was a Saturday afternoon and we were sitting at her place and she had cooked a whole big tray of chicken thighs and there were a few bottles of beer and we were sitting there eating and drinking and crying and crying about our relationships and experiencing the pain. And just out of the blue I said, 'You know, I hope our future partners are able to appreciate what we're going through right now because the lessons we learned from this will help us in our future relationship; being able to experience the loss and move into asking ourselves the question without blame: what are the lessons that I can learn here?'

When Jesus was asked why the man was blind and who was to blame Jesus said *there's no one to blame here*. And then he said, *the person is blind in order that the works of God might be seen*; or some other translations say *in order that the GLORY of God might be seen*. Now, again you might misinterpret this. If you look at this and say God made that person blind so that God could look good, or so that God could heal him and look good. If you believe in that kind of egotistical selfish God then yes, you can interpret that way. However, if you look at it this way – and Irenaeus, centuries later would say, *The GLORY of God is YOU fully alive*. The glory of God is you fully alive. As people move through the incidents, grieve well, learn lessons. It is amazing the beauty that can rise up later as they are able to move through that. When you see a parent on television talking about the need to forgive someone who's murdered their child; the power of that moment, the glory of that moment.

As you look at individuals down through the centuries who have gone through challenging periods or incidents in their lives, who didn't get stuck there, who didn't stay in pain or anger, who were able to get through that – and the glory that is seen in their lives as they move through the incident. What can I learn from this? Marianne Williamson said "We think we're not happy because of what we're not getting, or what we have lost. Instead," she says, "we're really not happy because of what we're not giving." When we go to that place of blame and we close down we stop giving. We stop giving our love, we stop giving our support, we stop reaching out and therefore we stop receiving the happiness and the support. We are called as people of faith not to stay stuck in blame. We are called to grieve well, we are called to learn lessons and we are called to move past blame into a spirit of blessedness.

For some of you we've done funerals here in the church for people you loved, people who were special in your lives. This sermon is not saying move past remembering; treasure the memories, hold them close to you; experience a spirit of blessedness by being blessed by those people in your lives and not getting stuck in the blame. And this can lead us to a strong sense of hope because we know that as the incidents happen we'll be able to handle them. We won't get stuck in the blame or the why, that we will be able to grieve and learn and experience blessedness.

Down through the centuries there have been lots of folks who have experienced blindness or a challenge to their sight but who didn't get stuck there. Here are some of them: Helen Keller, Stevie Wonder, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harriet Tubman, Louis Braille, Galileo, John Milton, Claude Monet, Horatio Nelson, Joseph Pulitzer. They didn't get stuck into bitterness. Andrea Bocelli born in 1958 in Italy, had a rare musical gift at an early age, also born with glaucoma and he went through several eye operations to try to heal him of glaucoma only at age twelve to be blinded by a soccer accident! Think of it. Think of his family – having seen him have all those operations and thinking it was fixed only to have a soccer accident and he then became blind! He was able to develop his musical skills and in many situations people who lose one sense are able to be even more gifted in other senses. They don't get stuck in blame. Later on he was starting to make a bit of a name for



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himself and a producer wanted a demo tape to give to Pavaratti because they wanted Pavaratti to sign on to sing a song and so when they took the tape to Pavaratti and gave it to him, Pavaratti listened to the tape and said, "You don't need me to sing that song, Bocelli should sing that song and the producer was able to persuade Pavaratti to sing it as a duet with Bocelli and that began Andrea Bocelli's career. Later on he became more famous with the song, "Time to Say Goodbye" and then later with Celine Dion when they sang, "The Prayer." Today Bocelli is one of the most humble men and also one of the richest men in all of Italy. If he'd got stuck in the blame then all of that glory of the brilliance of his voice would have been lost. Dyslexia can be debilitating for people. Listen to this list of people who lived with Dyslexia: Agatha Christie, Albert Einstein, Alexander Graham Bell, Cher – what would we do to disco? Just think what would have been lost? Tragedy!! Forget the phone! Well not really. Danny Glover, George Burns, Hans Christian Anderson, Fonzie, Jackie Stewart, Leonardo da Vinci, Magic Johnson, Thomas Edison, Tom Cruise, Walt Disney, Whoopi Goldberg, Winston Churchill, Woodrow Wilson, George Patton, Harry Belafonte, Nelson Rockefeller, Bruce Jenner, Nolan Ryan all lived with dyslexia! Didn't get stuck there; didn't blame and the glory of God revealed in them. People who had polio: Donald Sutherland, F.D. Roosevelt, Arthur Clarke, Jack Nicklaus had polio when he was a child, Mia Farrow, Neil Young, Paul Martin Sr. and Paul Martin Jr., Alan Alda, Joni Mitchell – all polio.

I want to end with the example of Ray Charles, born in 1940 in Georgia to an extremely poor family. He said when he was very young he didn't know anyone else who was poorer than they were. They were the poorest family around. When he was very young his family moved from Georgia to Florida and when he was five years old he witnessed his younger brother drowning in the bathtub at home and within two years Ray Charles went blind. The source of the blindness was never officially diagnosed. However, his mother was determined he wasn't going to wallow in bitterness and self pity and because he'd shown some musical skills she worked with him and supported him developing those skills. When he was fifteen years old his mother died. Here he is, fifteen years old, blind with no support and great musical skills. Who else had more reason to be bitter and to blame? Instead, at fifteen he started to tour. He met a fourteen year old named Quincy Jones and he taught Quincy Jones music. Later on in his life Ray Charles would write a song called "Georgia on My Mind." Ray Charles didn't get stuck in Florida – in losing his sight, losing his Mum and seeing his brother die – Ray Charles decided to go to Georgia in his mind to the goodness and the spirit of blessedness. So, whenever you hear that song, remember and whenever you get to that place of blaming remember to grieve well, to grieve well and to move into a spirit of blessedness giving thanks for the amazing people who come into our lives; who become our family; giving thanks for good relationships, good memories – even if they don't last forever and giving thanks for what remains and who remains. From blame to grief to grieving to healing and to learning lessons into a spirit of blessedness.

This morning you know there are going to be incidents; you know there are going to be things that will happen to you that will be deeply painful. I would ask you this morning not to rush over it or through it. Take time to grieve and to grieve well, but don't get stuck in the why and the blame. Move past that through grief into learning lessons and into a spirit of blessedness and be open to give to those around you. And the next time you hear "Georgia on My Mind" just close your eyes and think of Ray Charles and how he moved through his incidents and how the glory of God was heard in him.

Amen.