



LESSONS for LIFE

MARCH 15, 2009 11:00 a.m.
8 LIFE CHANGING MESSAGES FROM JESUS:
FROM WANT TO GRATITUDE
Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: LUKE 6: 38

Gospel: JOHN 6: 5 - 12

Well, you've heard maybe too many times the analogy of a glass being half full or being half empty and so before you this morning is a glass that's half full and that's half empty. Both of those truths are obvious. The issue isn't whether you see a glass that is half empty or half full, the issue is where do you live your lives? Do you live your life celebrating that the glass is half full or do you live your life regretting that the glass is half empty. Now, I have to admit at the beginning that this sermon is a huge challenge for me because my default position if you will is to be a half-empty person. I live my life in the midst of problems instead of living my life in gratitude and I have to struggle. It's not an easy place for me to live in gratitude and that can be demoralizing for people around me; to be demoralizing for the staff of our church when I constantly focus on what needs to be fixed or what needs to be changed or what the problems are. And it can be demoralizing for folks that I live with who have to constantly hear me complaining about what's broken or what needs to be fixed.

Now I'm not saying that we need to ignore problems at all. I think to see a lack, to see a need, to see a problem can be okay. The issue is whether we live in the problem or whether we live in gratitude. These eight life-changing lessons from Jesus, this one talks to us about moving from want to gratitude. I constantly live my life in a state of agitation. I look around and I see problems. I want to fix the problems and then I move on to the next problem that needs to be fixed and seldom do I stop and breathe long enough to enjoy what is. Now there's a good side to this. The good side is that I'm constantly looking for improvement. The good side is that I can be very irritated with mediocrity. The good side is that I can see an injustice in the world that I want fixed or changed. The problem is that if I live there all the time then life can pass me by; those moments to stop and enjoy what is are lost. Now I've often said that one of the most powerful people in the world is an optimistic activist. I have no problem with the optimist part and I have no problem with the activist. For me the challenge is to not live in the need or want or lack. The challenge is to celebrate what is, to begin with gratitude.

Jesus, in the second gospel reading this morning, saw the need. There were five thousand people there who were listening to him and they were hungry. He saw that need and he recognized it. Jesus also saw the potential. He saw the resources that were there; he saw the willingness of the people to offer their resources. The disciples, on the other hand, exhibited a scarcity mentality. The disciples saw the need of the people that were hungry but they said, "We don't have enough. It would be at least six month's wages to feed them a little bit." In another gospel they said, "Send them away, Jesus." Jesus believed that gratitude was the basis of our actions. Jesus saw what was there and gathered it up, celebrated generosity as they offered what was there to each other. He said, *Give and it will be given to you.* What you give is what you get. Now that can be taken both positively and negatively. Give and it will be given back to you. We think that generally that is positive: as we give to others we will receive back from others; but it can also mean that if we give out negativity we'll get it back. If we



LESSONS for LIFE

give out want and need we will get it back. If we give out problems then we will see more problems. The place to start – yes – recognize the need; see the needs around us in the world; recognize needs in your own life but the basis of action is gratitude. The basis of action is to recognize what you already have and bless it and give it away to others. Now I believe that most of us don't recognize the beauty around us. Most of us, because of the half empty part is always at the top, most of us spend our lives focusing on the empty portion instead of focusing on what is good and what has been given to us. You know, not all of the gifts of God are meant to be forever; particularly this side of heaven many of the gifts of God that we have been given in our lives, some of the individuals that have come into our lives are not meant to be for ever this side of heaven and it is important for us not to be taking for granted the goodness and beauty around us and within us.

Now I have a question this morning that may be tough for some of you to answer: How many of you are grieving this morning? We begin by being grateful for life that has been given to us. We begin by being grateful for being able to rise each morning and to experience the gift of life. We begin by being grateful for our bodies. Yes, many of us can look at our bodies and we can see things that need to be fixed – things that we need to work on – and that's okay, but the place of action, the foundation for action is gratitude for what we've been given, the beauty of nature around us. Yes, we can be concerned about our environment and the way we treat the environment but the place to start is gratitude for the beauty that we see. A year and a half ago my optometrist sent me to a specialist because he was concerned about something that he noticed and the specialist said I have macular degeneration in both of my eyes and she said that it was unusual to see that in someone as young as me, and I thought uh uh – once again I'm ahead of my time! But I do share with you this morning how that diagnosis a year and a half ago has changed me. I am much more grateful for the beauty of colours, much more grateful for John's paintings; much more grateful for sunrises and sunsets, for stained glass windows, for babies' faces; much more grateful for pictures of family members long gone; much more grateful for little reminders; much more grateful for seeing two dogs playing; much more grateful for what I can see. Every morning as part of this I have to look at a grid and look at that grid and stare at the centre and see if there's been any change because it can change from a dry form of macular degeneration which I have to a wet form instantly which would require surgery quickly or I could go blind. It can be gradual or it can be abrupt. So every morning I have to look at this thing and every morning I'm reminded; and I could choose to be very irritated – that would be natural for me – and be very irritated about the challenge and having to do that and what it might mean. However, I've made an exception when I look at that and it reminds me to observe and to be thankful for what I can see today and for who I will see today.

We could look at the economic situation before us and I'm sure many of you are worried about your retirement savings and how they have gone down a bit or a lot; or we can be grateful for what we have, thankful for what we've been given and for some lessons along the way. The issue isn't recognizing want or need or challenge; the issue is not to live there but to live in gratitude. Jesus saw five thousand people who were hungry and he saw the resources: the loaves and the fishes and he began by blessing what they had and when he blessed what they had and when they shared it with each other there was more than enough to go around. Yes, we can look around in our own world and see there is much to be changed, but don't live there. Live in the gratitude of what is. You can look around in your life, and I'm sure many of us see in our lives what needs to change, but don't live there. Live in gratitude for what is. For every one of you who may be complaining about the challenge of caring for an elderly parent, there's someone else here who wishes their parent were here to be cared for. For every one of you who may be complaining about a partner who is irritating you there's someone else



LESSONS for LIFE

wishing they had a partner to irritate them. For every one of you who is complaining about problems at work there's someone else wishing they had a job. For every one of you complaining about a house that has endless repairs there's someone else wishing they had a home.

We can take things so easily for granted. I received this e-mail from Ruby:

Dear Brent,

To follow up on our short conversation this morning I wanted to tell you my reaction to the web-cast. Yesterday, Saturday March 7th, I was not feeling very well and so I decided to give myself the day. I wandered around the apartment and finally settled at the computer and decided to watch the service Wally and I had missed when I had gone to see my son Mike. I knew Billy was singing and was sorry to miss him. As you know, I've listened to the many past announcements regarding the coming of MCC's new web-cast and I must admit I was lackadaisical about it all and just sort of took it all for granted. It would happen – whenever. Well, I watched that service and then the next Sunday's service "Remember Georgia." When the service ended I just sat there filled with peaceful joy. My chest swelled with pride at the thought that pierced my mind: I feel so lucky to be a member of this church.

And how did all this happen? Well, because we have a gay son; that's what started the journey. Now – about the sermons: You know, I sit quietly with Wally every Sunday when we can be there and listen with the congregation to all your messages. I try and absorb all you have to say knowing that at my age, 80, I will be lucky to remember the theme. Well, sitting at my computer it felt different and afterwards I wondered why. My reflection showed me that although the congregation wasn't there I was having this one-on-one learning session with you. It was wonderful and I say thank you, thank you, thank you. On further reflection, and you do a lot of this when you're 80, I'm grateful that we can share our Sundays with our church family but I can now come home and have you help me remember the day and the message. This is a wonderful and amazing thing about MCC Toronto and what we've done for people all over the world. Thank God for this vision. I sent the web-cast address to share with friends in Florida and I wonder - how did it make them feel?

Ruby, thank you for not taking our church for granted and thank you for sharing your reflection and being open to sharing it with us and I appreciate your letting me read that this morning.

Years ago, when I came out to my parents, my dad called me and it was a really difficult phone call. My dad said some things that were very hurtful. It was a Monday morning and I was getting ready to go to school and I was sitting in my home all by myself and during that whole phone call I felt like someone was holding my hand – a physical presence holding my hand – and yet there was nobody else there. I believe in guardian angels. I believe that God sends us guardian angels to help us in the most difficult of times, to help us to live our lives and to help us to continue to give when it would be so easy to close down; where it would be so easy to focus on hurt, or loss, or lack, or problem. It would be so easy to



LESSONS for LIFE

focus on what's not there; and yet that's not what we're called to live our lives. We're called to live our lives with gratitude, thankful for what is. Yes, there may be a leak in the ceiling but it's *our* place. There may be tattered old carpet but it's our place. Your home may irritate you, your friends and partners may irritate you; your body may be aching in some places but don't live in lack. Be motivated into action by gratitude for what is.

Amen.