



## LESSONS for LIFE

March 16, 2008 9:00am and 11:00 a.m.

What Did Jesus Do?

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### SACRED READINGS

**Lesson:** Excerpts from Robert Holden's *Happiness Now*

**Gospel:** MATTHEW 21: 1 - 11

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One of the dangers of a long sermon series is each week as we go along in the series and I summarise it the sermons get longer and longer and longer. I guess that's one of the joys of long sermon series too, sort of. This sermon series has been based on a book called Happiness Now by a man named Robert Holden who's part of the positive psychology movement. In his book he talks about the issue of happiness and how we can experience happiness not just as a momentary thing, but as a way of life; not as the exception, but as the rule. He begins in the book talking about how we make a mistake by trying to search for happiness outside of ourselves. If you remember that very first Sunday, I used my glasses as an example. I took them off and hung them on my vestments then went looking for them. Well, this morning I had an experience that was not exactly one that was made up as a sermon illustration. Getting ready for church before the 9 o'clock service I have to put on all this sound equipment before my robes so I put all this sound equipment on - get ready to put my robes on and I thought, Oh, I better put the sound equipment on. So I went looking for the sound equipment until I realised I already had it on, that my Madonna mike was already here.

You know, my Mum has Alzheimer's and they say that most adult children of Alzheimer's patients worry about their own memory and whether, when they forget something, if that's a sign. My doctor finally got fed up with me complaining and wondering and fretting and he said, "Brent, I'm going to send you to a Neurologist just to get you to calm down." So he did and they put me through all kinds of tests and the Neurologist said, "No, you don't have to worry. You're just a busy person and it's an age thing." I don't know if that helped or not. And he said, "If you misplace your car keys, that's not a sign you need to worry. It's when you have your car keys in your hand and you don't know what they're for. That's a time to worry." So this morning I thought, well forgetting that I already have my Madonna mike on is not a problem. Thinking I'm Madonna might be the problem! (laughter)

So, we do not find happiness by searching for it outside of ourselves. It's not about an external circumstance. We also took a look that happiness is not a set of circumstances. It is not that we're more happy because good things are happening or less happy because challenging things are happening. It's not a set of circumstances; it's a set of attitudes. And those attitudes begin with the basis that we're created in the image of God. The stuff of God is in each one of us. And that the essence of who we are at birth we are created with Love and Peace and Joy internally as the essence of who we are. So when we connect with that internal strength, love and peace and joy, then we experience more happiness. That yes, there can be external circumstances that can influence us for the positive and for the negative, but they are not the deciders. We can experience sadness while at the same time maintaining our happiness because we live with the loss while we celebrate the gift. We live with losses in our lives while we focus on the gift that is or the gift that was.

Then last Sunday we took a look at internal circumstances, particularly our own self-talk. How we need to shift our self-talk away from guilt and away from judgment and shift it to gratitude and goodness. Today, being



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Palm Sunday, we want to take a look at how Jesus handled the highs and the lows of his life. What would Jesus do?

The religious leaders, the Religious Right of Jesus' day tried to arrest him and they were unsuccessful. A little while later Jesus heard that a friend of his, Lazarus, had died and that the family wanted Jesus to come. Jesus was preparing to go there to visit the family in Judea and his followers said, "You can't go. The Religious Right have already tried to arrest you and to stone you. You cannot go there." Jesus said, "I must go." We cannot live our lives based on fear. We cannot make decisions in our lives out of a fear based mentality. We have to base our decisions out of faith in God, faith in the future, faith in our own strength, our own strength to survive.

The early Christian church grew very, very quickly. Historians looking back at how come this church grew so quickly said one of the main reasons was that early Christians were not afraid of death. They viewed death as a transition, a valley that you walk through to the other side. Because they were not afraid of death, they were able to stand up against the pressures against them, the oppressive forces politically. But more importantly, they were able to go into situations of danger and be able to be a presence there, particularly when there were diseases ravaging whole sections of the world. Because Christians were not afraid of death, they would go into those situations, risk the danger to be there to help people, to support people in the midst of those challenges and not stay away because they were afraid. That courage, that faith based, not fear based, that faith based decision caught the attention of the public. They said there must be something about this faith.

I think that says something to us today as Metropolitan Community Churches around the world. That we need to make sure that we stand up to the forces that oppress. That we speak to power and challenge it when it's inappropriate. That we be people of courage to go into situations: for instance, Human Rights situations. That we go into those situations with courage, trusting that God and good will ultimately win.

You know, Theologians differ about whether they think Jesus knew what was coming in his life. Some say he didn't know what was coming. Others thought he did. I think he did. That makes it even more powerful when we look back at his life. In the midst of the betrayal he didn't lose the focus. In the midst of being accused of things he didn't get off track. In the midst of being attacked he stayed focused. In the midst of the overwhelming needs around him – imagine as word got out about his ability to heal, then greater and greater numbers of people came to him expecting to be healed. Larger and larger and larger crowds, some were healed, some were not. In the midst of looking around and seeing all of those needs and seeing the difficulty of the Disciples to get the message when he became frustrated with them, Jesus could so easily have become discouraged. He could so easily have said that happiness is nowhere to be found, nowhere to be found. Yet look at that word, "nowhere" for just a moment please. All you do is put a gap in a different place and it moves from "happiness is nowhere" to "happiness is now here". Same letters squish it together and it is nowhere. Take a look at it differently and it is now here. Both of those are true.

You can look at the world and say, "Where is happiness?" Or you can hear what Jesus said when he said, "The realm of God, the dominion of God is already in you." When people wanted the circumstances to change, when they wanted God to change the world, Jesus said, "The Kingdom, the realm of God is already here." It's already within you, it's already among you. Happiness is now here. Now, we don't have blinders on. We can see the world and its challenges and its difficulties, the prejudices that exist, the religious conflicts that exist, the parts of our world in turmoil with difficult decisions to make about how we help, how we support, how we make a difference in those areas. We see the problems, but we face those problems knowing that we are created in the image of God and so is the other. We face those problems with love being the essence of who we are. We make our decisions based on love. How can love win out? What is the loving thing to do?



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Peace within. What is the peaceful thing to do? How can we achieve peace? And joy within. How can we struggle with these things together and still celebrate the gift of life?

The realm of God is within you-love and peace and joy within you. No person can take that away unless you give it up. That's challenging. It's much easier to blame somebody. It's much easier to blame your Ex or your Ex's new partner for your unhappiness. It's much easier to blame government for our unhappiness. It's much easier to blame institutions than to accept responsibility that no institution and no person can take our happiness away unless we give it up.

Jesus not only had to deal with the challenges, he also had to deal with the praise. For as word got out people followed him from town to town. They even began to worship him. He said, "Don't worship me." He turned the focus back to God and away from himself. The ups and downs, how did Jesus handle them? He stayed focused on his purpose, on his strength and he continued to do the will and the work of God. The highs and the lows, the rewards and the recognitions we can let them go to our head.

Last night John and I were given tickets to a musical. We went to it and on the way home we came home on the subway. As we were on the subway this man came up to me and he said, "Well, I never expected to see someone with the Order of Canada on the subway." For a little split second, I wanted to say, "Well, John you should have got a cab for me." (laughter) "You know you really should have." Some of us can get off track, not just by the challenges we face, but also by the praise that might come our way or the recognition that might come our way.

That day when the crowd said to Jesus, "Hosanna Hosanna", in the hundreds or thousands they were waving palm branches and celebrating his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was very realistic. He knew that the Hosannas one day, within a few days would change to crucify. Imagine when he healed someone how happy that person was or the family was. Imagine how the Religious Right were angry at him for breaking what they thought were the rules. Praise. Criticism. Imagine what the crowd was like when Jesus healed some and then, the Scriptures say, he went away to pray for awhile, to rest for awhile. Not everyone got healed. Imagine the disappointment. Jesus stayed true to his calling, stayed connected with his sources of strength-rest and prayer for him, renewal for him-because Jesus knew that God in ultimate victory would win out and not fear.

There's a movement called "appreciative enquiry". What that is: let's say you are in place A and you want to get to place B. Now it's perfectly legitimate to visualise about B. It's great to say, to visualise this is where we want to be. This is where we are, this is where we want to be. The challenge that most of us get into then is we develop a plan of how to get from A to B, how to deal with that gap. We become gap focused. The folks in appreciative enquiry say that's it's much more successful instead of being gap focused, visualise yes, but start with the strengths that you have. Focus on how in the past you've overcome that challenge, how in the past you were able to be successful. What are the strengths that you have and that are around you? Build on those strengths, don't focus on the gap. Focus on the good as you move toward what you want to happen.

The place to start is right here. If you want more happiness in your life, the place to start is right here. It's not in waiting as Rosemary read for us this morning. For as long as you wait, happiness waits. As long as you wait, love waits. As long as you wait, the joy of life waits for you. If you invest your happiness in another person, then that person can take it away from you. Love and peace and joy are not invested in someone outside. Jesus said, "Love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself." That's the place to start.



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That day the crowd adored Jesus. Hosanna, hosanna. A week later it was, "Crucify him." We need to be very careful not to get caught up in the mob whether they're praising us or criticising us. We need to make sure that our path is the right path, that our decisions are the right decisions no matter whether they bring praise or criticism.

Holden says if you make plans for happiness they will not work. It's not something we can search for or plan for. Our happiness does not require a plan. It simply requires our ability to accept it and to connect with it right now.

If I asked you what island you'd like to live on, I am sure I would get a variety of names of islands. But the reality is most of us spend a lot of our time living on another island. It's called someday I'll... Someday I'll do this or someday I'll do that. As long as you wait, happiness waits. As long as you wait, love waits and peace waits and freedom waits. So, what about you? In the ups and downs, when you leave here today you may experience praise or you may experience criticism. Whatever the course, stay the course. Jesus laid the foundation for his life before the crowds came, before the praise came, before the attacks came and before even the Disciples came. Jesus recognised his connection with God, relied on it and built it. Jesus recognised the peace within so that he could say consistently, "My peace I give you." He recognised love within so that he could say consistently, "Love yourself. Love your neighbour, love God." He recognised the joy within himself so he could say, "My joy is in you so that your joy may be full." Jesus was clear. He could say, "I am here so that you might experience life more abundantly. I am here to point the way. I am here to remind you of the love in you and through you for our world, the peace in you and through you for our world, the joy in you and through you for our world."

So this week, whether it is praise or criticism, stay centred on your purpose. I'm not unrealistic. There will be moments this week when you will experience difficulty and you may voice like Jesus did, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" There will be those moments of devastation. Live with the loss, focus on the gift. Jesus went to "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" and then a few seconds later he was able to say, "Into your hands oh God I commit my spirit." The path before you this week is clear, remembering that you were created in the image of God to experience the abundance of life and to help others do the same. And don't let the praises get you off track. Neither let the criticisms get you off track. Love, peace and joy within being connected with those, remembering those that will lead us to experience this abundant life Jesus promises.

Amen