



LESSONS for LIFE

March 1, 2009 7:00 p.m

8 LIFE CHANGING MESSAGES FROM JESUS FROM BLAME TO LESSON

Rev. Brent Hawkes, C.M.

What we are going to do in this season of Lent is a series – as we usually do during Lent – but we’re going to do it a bit different this time because what I did was that I went through all four Gospels and the early writings of the Christian church and took a quick review of all of the miracle stories, the parables, all of the sermons and the teachings of Jesus and I really wanted to pull out from that what the key messages were. If we had to say what were the eight key themes or key messages that Jesus taught – what would they be - and then to have a sermon series around those messages. So the scriptures we’re using are going to be all Gospel readings and we’re going to really focus on that. Now, you’re maybe thinking that’s not unusual for a Christian church to take a look at what Jesus said, so we’re doing that but we’re doing that in a way of taking those messages and asking what they mean to us today; what are those messages for us today? So during these eight sermons – seven Sundays plus Good Friday – is that I’m going to do the opening sermons today and the closing sermon but the five Sundays in between other folks in the evening are going to take those same scriptures and that same theme and develop it; and so even though the sermon series is the same the perspectives will differ and you’ll get two different perspectives and you’ll get additional ideas each Sunday. I encourage you – and if you’re morning folks and back here for the evening I’d encourage you to do that during Lent because in the next five weeks it will be someone else giving a different perspective and if you’re an evening person then I would encourage you to check in to the webcast and hear the morning part and that way you’ll get both perspectives during the season of Lent.

So tonight I want to begin with the first of those lessons and I’m going to share with you a scripture reading from the gospel of John, chapter 9, verses 1 – 3:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in his life.”

As you go through life there will be many, many incidents that will happen in your lives that will be deeply disappointing or painful or difficult to face. Some of those incidents may involve the death of a loved one and being realistic we know that. We know that in this human experience called life there will be many people close to us who’ll die. My partner John’s parents are ninety-three years old and they have almost no one left of their generation and, because John’s an only child, they have no relatives left. They have lived long enough to be able to see all of the people close to them, except for one or two, die. We also know that realistically as we look at our lives there’ll be incidents that happen in our lives: sometimes someone will say things which will be hurtful: sometimes someone close to us will get ill and we really want to be there to help them to fix it and maybe we are not able to. Some of those incidents may involve natural disasters like the tsunami or an earthquake or a plane crash and in this sermon tonight I want you to hear me clearly, I’m not diminishing at all the impact of these incidents in our lives; I’m not diminishing at all the pain that arises from it. I believe that Jesus has a lesson for us



LESSONS for LIFE

about how we face the incidents, and for some of us these incidents may be coming but for some of us these incidents have already occurred and we still haven't dealt with them and they're still haunting us; and they're still impacting our lives. So often when these things happen the very first thing we do is to ask why; it's a natural response: why God did you allow that bus to go off a cliff and to let all those children get killed? A natural question. Why God did you allow someone to be taken from us? A natural question. However, the difficulty is that often we get stuck in the why question and often we get stuck in the blaming. As Jesus walked along and his disciples saw that blind man they said to Jesus, Whose fault is it? "Who do we blame for this?" Do we blame the man – did he sin? Is that why he's blind? Do we blame his parents? Who can we blame here?" We often want to find someone to blame and we get stuck in the process. I really want to challenge you this evening that if you find yourself in that blame place I want that to trigger for you a kind of self-examination: what's going on in my life and why am I now blaming? Why am I getting stuck there? Because when you get into blaming we either blame ourselves for a mistake we made or we blame other people for what they've done to us or we blame God – and particularly, when we blame God then we move away from God. If we're blaming God for the bus that went off a cliff or the plane that crashed or a friend who got sick then we tend to move away from God and we get stuck there.

I want to use an example of divorce or separation. It's been my experience over the years that divorce or separation is probably the most difficult thing to deal with; people have a harder time overcoming the pain of the divorce or separation almost more than any other pain and part of it is – the person is there. I think there should be a rule that whenever someone gets divorced one person has to move out of the city – because it would be easier – and particularly when you're faced with that person when they have moved on and are involved in other relationships it is really painful; and people get stuck in that wanting to blame themselves for mistakes they have made and in the case where someone may have broken a covenant and had an affair and that has been part of what was not supposed to be a part of the relationship and then they blame themselves for the mistake; or they blame the other person or they blame the new person in their life for the situation and they get stuck in that blaming place. Blame always leads to anger and guilt and resentment and closing down and moving away from God. Blame takes our energy away from living and keeps us in that stuck place.

When those incidents happen and you ask the 'why' questions and you start to move into blame I would encourage you instead to grieve well. Someone said to me just before the service tonight, "You know, we don't know how to grieve very well; we're almost chastised in our society for grieving." We see a lot of examples of how not to grieve but we don't hear many healthy examples of how to grieve. Part of the problem is that grieving is different for each of us and it's different in different situations and it takes time and we need to give ourselves the time to be able to grieve and to heal. Learning how to grieve well and, as has been suggested, this might be a great topic for a future sermon or series – but learning how to grieve well determines how well we heal. It determines whether the incident will end up being a stumbling block or will divert our lives temporarily and in some cases forever. Some people face an incident in their lives, a painful incident in their lives and they become so destroyed by it or so distrusting because of it because their lives have been changed for ever. Grieving means acknowledging the pain; it's real; acknowledging the feelings that are there – experiencing those feelings. You know, we're so conditioned in our society to avoid pain. Someone might say, "Oh, that sermon might be really uncomfortable," and they say that meaning it's a negative, when often I would take that as a positive. It's a good thing. Being uncomfortable is okay but we want to avoid it. We want to medicate ourselves away from it. We want to get ourselves busy to avoid it; and you've heard me say again and again the book *When The Heart Waits* so impacted me and what the book talks about is



LESSONS for LIFE

that so often the messages from God can only be learned in the uncomfortable places and if we jump over them we miss the message and so we have to live in that and stay in that uncomfortable place for awhile.

A few years ago a young couple in our church came to me and they had just had a miscarriage and they were devastated by the response of people around them because people were saying, "Oh, don't worry; you can get pregnant again," or, "Just get over it. Move on." They needed to grieve and they needed people to understand they needed some time to grieve. The good news is that they were here this morning and she's pregnant again and very pregnant again, so soon they will have another baby in their family, but they needed that support and time to grieve the loss and then they'd be able to move on. It's the same for people who've had a pet that's been really close to them and they need some time to grieve that. But there are people who'd say, "Oh well, you can always go to the Humane Society or go to the pet store. You can always get another pet." No, what's needed is time to grieve: time to experience the pain and the feeling and time to heal.

There's another gospel reading I want to share with you and in this gospel reading Jesus sounds particularly harsh. It's from the Gospel of Luke, the 9th chapter, beginning to read at the 59th verse.

Jesus said, "Follow Me." But this person said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." And another person said, "I will follow you, Jesus, but first let me say good-bye to those at home." But Jesus said to him, "No one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Now both of those sayings look very harsh. Both of those sayings – like, Jesus, you're not very considerate here. Someone's dad has died and they say they're going to follow you but they want to go home to the funeral first, and Jesus said no! In the second case the person said, yes I'll follow you, Jesus, but first I want to say good-bye to my family, - and Jesus says no. In both of those instances it makes Jesus look very very harsh. Now, they make Jesus look harsh only if you take them literally, but if you take them metaphorically as the people in his day got it – you know, if these sayings were understood by Jesus' followers as harsh they never would have included them in the writings. They'd have said, "Let's take those things out as it makes Jesus look bad," but they left them in because they understood them. Jesus wasn't being harsh; Jesus was teaching a story here and what he was saying was that if we're going to move forward in our own lives we can't stay stuck in the past. We can't stay paralyzed by the death of those close to us and we can't stay imprisoned in the expectations of others even if they are our families. Yes – say good-bye; yes, say good-bye to those close to you and yes – as you heal move into the future and your own lives will unfold before you. Learn to grieve well. As we experience incidents, as we ask the 'why' questions and not get stuck in the blame, as we heal well, as we grieve well, then we can move into the place of being able to learn some lessons. Jesus said, *This guy didn't sin; that's not why he's blind and it's not that his parents sinned. Don't blame his parents.* Jesus said, *This person is blind so that the works of God or, as the translation says, so that the GLORY of God might be seen in him.* Now again, we might misunderstand this. I was at a fundraiser last night for Casey House and I had to work the room – that's why they send me to these things, - to meet people, hand out business cards, work the room. I hate it! I always try to find one person and try to huddle into a corner and talk to that one person, but last night I tried to earn my keep and work the room. I walked up to one guy and he said, "Oh hi Brent, how are you doing?" I knew him, I'd seen him



LESSONS for LIFE

around the community and around gave him a hug and thought, oh great, here's a safe place. Then he said, "You're going to be mad at me this week," and I thought gosh, here we go, so I asked, "Why?" and he said, "Well, I'm part of the group that's launching the atheist bus advertising campaign and I'm going to campaign this week. So I said, "Great. I think it's a great thing. I think it's raising some conversations and discussion, etc." He then said, "I think all religion is dysfunctional and I think anyone who believes in God is delusional and should be locked up..." And I said, "You're sounding like a fundamentalist. We have the fundamentalist theists and we have the fundamentalist atheists on the two extremes." I said, "My problem with most atheists is that they're judging a Christianity from a hundred years ago. They're judging a Christianity that many Christians are leaving behind. If you're going to judge me judge me for who I am today. Don't judge me for the extremes of the fundamentalists today or old Christianity and come into the current understanding of what Christianity is."

Sorry, I got off on a tangent and now let me get back to my notes! So, in that saying of when Jesus said that person is not blind because of someone's mistake, don't blame anyone. Jesus said that this person is blind so that the glory of God might be revealed. Now again, if you misunderstand that and think God is selfish – God made this person blind so that God could rescue the person and look good – what would you think of a person who did that? What would you think of a person who would cause pain for somebody else so that they might rescue the person and look good? You'd say that such a person was selfish, vain and egotistical, so don't do that with God either. God is not making this person blind so that God could look good. What this means is that the glory of God could be seen in this person. Irenaeus said, centuries later, *The glory of God is you, fully alive*. The glory of God is you, fully alive. The glory of God is seeing in people who rise above the incidents of their lives, who grieve well, who learn lessons and who can then continue to be contributing giving members of society. How can I learn from this situation? How can I become a better person because of this incident? Yes, I may have lost someone close to me but what a gift it was to have that person in my life; when we move out of blame and into blessedness. That's what we're called to do as people of faith. Yes, things will happen and I don't think any worse things happen to non-believers than to believers. I don't think God plays that game. I think just because you're a person of faith it doesn't let you off and you're going to have as many bad things happen to you as other people; but as people of faith we're called to deal with them differently. We're called not to stay in why, not to stay in blame; we're called to grieve and learn the lessons and to move into a place of blessedness. Marianne Williamson said, *We think we're not happy because of what we're not getting or what's been taken away from us, when the reality is we're really not happy because of what we're not giving*. When we blame we close down and we stop giving and we stop loving and we stop trusting and when we move out of blame and into healing and into learning lessons then we open back up again.

Just think of the example of the people you know who, on a relationship break-up have said to you, "You know, I'm never going to trust anyone again. I'm never going to be vulnerable again." They've closed down. Instead of saying "That relationship is over. I'm going to grieve the loss of that relationship and I'm going to learn some lessons from it. Not that I'm never going to trust again but the lessons that can help me in the next relationship, to move from a spirit of blame to a spirit of blessedness." This leads us to hope, because then we know that no matter what happens, no matter what the incidents are to come we're not going to get stuck in the blame place. We're going to be able to handle it and learn and grow and continue to love and continue to trust.

Down through the years there have been lots of individuals like the man in the scripture who was blind and they have risen above being either totally blind or partially blind to be able to be unbelievable



LESSONS for LIFE

examples. They've gone out of blame, they didn't get stuck there, and they've moved on to blessedness. Hear this list: 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 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 Botcelli'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. 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. 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." One of the women at church this morning said that that song was her Dad's favourite and at his funeral one of his buddies sat down and played "Georgia on My Mind" because it's a song that reaches back into goodness. It talks about there are eyes that are seeing for me. There are people who hold me and lift me up. 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.



LESSONS for LIFE

Amen.