



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5217

First broadcast February 22, 2009

WELCOME

Daniel Pawlus: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is the Right Reverend Jeffrey Lee, Bishop of Chicago for the Episcopal Church. He’ll be talking with us about how God can turn brokenness into something precious and beautiful.

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome back Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, in our continuing series on the “Fruits of the Spirit.”

Lydia Talbot: We begin with the story of a Muslim, American doctor whose passion for discovering the richness of other faiths began as a young physician in a Catholic hospital. Now retired from the University of Chicago, Shakeela Hassan is co-executive producer of a new documentary that finds common ground in the “sounds of faith” found in the three Abrahamic faith traditions.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Shakeela Hassan: We are all beautiful people that come from different backgrounds, traditions, ethnicities and the magnificence of all of us being diverse is God’s plan.

I was born and raised as a Muslim. We lived with other faith people. There was great relationship with the Hindus and some Christians, Zoroastrians. So I was exposed to all these faiths and have friends in all of them. I had the opportunity to work in obstetrics and gynecology at St. Mary of Nazareth Hospital. It was a Catholic hospital, beautiful chapel. Every morning there was a knock on my door with a beautiful sister standing there and saying, “Time for mass. 5 o’clock, time for mass, doctor.” I found them pensive in prayer and so quiet. That impression has stayed in my heart very vividly. No sound, yet sound. We are all breathing, saying amen.

When they asked me what would you call this documentary, I said “Sounds of Faith.” This is something fascinating how we pray and associate the sounds in our quest to find God, connect with God, worship God. Sound, rhythm and movement define life and sound is an integral part of how a human being reaches out to God. Every breath is prayer. Every step you take in the direction with movement is prayer. And every time you utter something—like the monosyllabic sounds of “hu” in Sufism to “aum” in Buddhism—you are breathing out to God.

That's the very simple thought that brought me to this juncture that we have something in common. For example, when people travel to Muslim countries they hear the call to prayer five times a day. I haven't heard anybody coming and saying that they were disturbed. In fact, that's the only thing they remember.

Same thing goes with the church bells on Sunday. These sounds are inviting people to congregate, to come together, to think of God. The more I know people from other faiths, I'm very comfortable with my faith. There are many items in the Koran that tell you that God created us from the same male and female and made us different so we can recognize each other, get to know each other, and then to live with each other.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: The documentary, "Sounds of Faith," from which many of the images you just saw are drawn, is being co-produced by Shakeela Hassan and veteran filmmaker, Bill Kurtis. For more information, you can visit our web site at 30goodminutes.org. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

The Right Reverend Jeffrey Lee, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago, studied music and German literature at the University of Michigan before entering seminary at Nashotah House in Wisconsin. In 2000, after serving congregations in Indiana and Wisconsin, he was called as Rector of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, Washington, where he served until his consecration as the 12th bishop of Chicago in 2008. We're delighted to welcome Bishop Lee to "30 Good Minutes." His message is called, "Wounded Gifts." Welcome, Jeff.

MESSAGE

Jeffrey Lee: Thank you very much for the invitation to be here.

He was born two months early, and this year he turns twenty-one. You would never know it now, but at his birth my twenty-year-old son Jonathan weighed just two and a half pounds. I could hold him easily in one hand.

We were lucky though. Jonathan was born without many of the problems premature babies can have. From the beginning he was breathing pretty much on his own. Although we had to leave him in that warm Lucite box, hooked up to all those wires and tubes, we could take him out bundled up to hold him. But Jonathan was born with a special circumstance or problem or some people might call it a handicap. Jonathan was born without a left hand.

I'm not one of those people who routinely remember my dreams in any vivid way, but in the days and for a couple of weeks after Jonathan's birth I had a recurring dream. In it there appeared as a kind of central figure, a little blond haired boy in an Easter suit. "Perfect" and complete with two hands. I was startled by how it repeated so clearly every night. And I began to welcome the dream oddly. It became a kind of companion to me as we began to deal with the reality of his birth, all the questions about what this life of his might be like, what would he be able to do or not do, what about other kids, the inevitable questions, the stares, and on and on.

I was scheduled to preach about a month after Jonathan was born and in that sermon I decided to tell the story of his birth and the dream I'd been having and the utterly brilliant sense I had begun to make of it. You see, I had figured out that the little blond haired boy in the dream was the perfect fantasy version of my son that I'd been gestating in my head for seven months. And God was surely telling me in the dream that I had to let go of that perfect fantasy child in order to receive the gift of the real, "imperfect" little boy who had been born. Pretty good, I thought. Didn't I need to learn to love my son just as he was and is, not as I would have planned him to be? Doesn't Jesus tell us that we have to accept the cross of reality if we are to follow his way of love? Didn't Christ empty himself, taking on our imperfect nature in order to redeem it?

Well, yes he did. As a Christian I believe all those things. But my spiritual pride let me off the hook way too easily and way too early.

During this time of my life I was exchanging sermons regularly with a friend here in Chicago, a priest, someone who had been a good friend of mine for a long time and one of those blessed people who knows me better than I do. And he wrote his own sermon in response to the one I had written. In it he told his congregation about Jonathan's birth, about the way my wife and I were dealing with it, and about my dream. And then he said words, which have become the story of my adult faith journey. He told his congregation about my interpretation of the little boy in the Easter suit, about my conclusion that it represented that perfect little fantasy child I had to let go of. But, then he said this, "Jeffrey's wrong. It's not a perfect fantasy Jonathan in the dream. It's a perfect fantasy Jeffrey." He was right.

Jonathan's birth laid bare the wounds at the heart of my life. My son was and is just fine. It was me God wanted to heal. I have spent most of my life believing that if I was only smart enough, good enough, elegant enough, capable enough, hard working enough, enough, enough, enough. If only I could be glittering enough I might be saved, I might be safe. All my own little personal versions, of course, of that ancient curse of our kind, the belief that we can do it ourselves, heal ourselves, save ourselves. It's a view of God held in some form by many, many people I think. A view a former assistant of mine liked to call "the cosmic job interview." God is the Almighty CEO sitting behind the biggest desk in the universe and only when I've got my resume honed and my shoes shined and my best interview techniques ready to go, can I risk knocking on the door. The Bible tells a story about Jesus and Peter. Jesus has just told his friends that he's going to be crucified, not the version of a successful, conventionally powerful savior they'd been hoping for. "That's never going to happen to you!" says Peter. And Jesus calls Peter Satan and tells him to get out of the way.

I think though the lie that we can save ourselves masks a deeper suspicion: that God really is that demanding, angry, judging figure behind the smoke and mirrors of Oz. And I don't know what else the cross is but the unmasking of that. That's why the cross is such a potent symbol and why some of us cling to it for dear life. In the Jewish mystical tradition there is the suggestion that in order to create something that was not the omnipresent God—God present everywhere—God had to create a space within God's own being in order to create another that was not God. God, in other words, is wounded in the act of creation. It is a birthing image. And that idea is brought to its Christian conclusion in the crucified One, the Book of Revelation's vision of the Lamb of God, God's Word, Holy Wisdom, slain from all eternity. The cross, in other words, isn't some

kind of transaction appeasing a bloodthirsty God. It is the ultimate revelation of the shape of God's own heart. It is simply God being God – entering our wounded, imperfect, bleeding humanity so that we might be remade, so that we might have some good news for a world that knows all about imperfection and fear and death. The resurrected Jesus does not lose his wounds, he takes them with him into the fullness of what we call resurrection. In one story the Bible tells us that his wounds were the only way at least one of his friends was able to recognize him at all. And it's still the most reliable way.

There's a wonderful Victorian hymn. Some of the lyrics go like this:

*There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner, and more graces for the good;
There is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in his blood.*

*There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given.
There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the head.*

*For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we should take him at his word;
And our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.*

Unaccountably, the version of that hymn that's sung in most places is missing a verse and it's my favorite. It goes like this:

*But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own
And we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own.*

The monk Thomas Merton said the only definition of God that made any sense to him at all was "Mercy within mercy within mercy within mercy... ."

The really shocking claim of the Christian tradition is that this endless fountain of mercy, the Creator of the Universe, the Ultimate, Holy Mystery we call God became merely, fully human. A favorite theologian of mine says, "We crucified Jesus, not because he was God, but because he claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our standards for assessing the claim... We didn't want to be saved in our humanity, we wanted to be fished out of it." We still do. I don't know how else to explain the monstrous fantasies of those novels and movies about being "left behind." This misreading of Scripture from my perspective that predicts that all those who believe precisely the right things about Jesus will be scooped up out of the Great Tribulation, as it's called, and everybody else will be left to suffer the wrath of God. That kind bloodthirsty, killer God is not the one who insists on coming to us on our own terms, not the one I see revealed in Jesus. Fishing us out of our humanity is the one thing God refuses to do.

That's the lesson I have been learning for the last twenty years. It's the lesson I should have been learning my whole life. It's not the fantasy version of myself, the carefully edited, hyper-competent, polished caricature of me I put out there for public consumption. It's not that me that Jesus loves and died for. It's the real me. Just as I am without one plea. Imperfections, wounds, heartaches, disappointments, fears, joys, sins, unrealized plans, and all. And healing, transformation, means letting down my guard long enough to let the wounded and glorified God revealed in Jesus embrace the real me, hold the real me, and fill the real me with his own life.

So, where are your wounds? It's an important question. What are the secret, shameful, inadequate, fearful, wounded, missing parts of yourself that you would rather keep safely out of reach and view? Could it be that those are the very things God loves most? Could they be the gifts out of which God can make you and me agents of compassion, hope and healing in this world?

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Jeffrey Lee, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Bishop Lee. Bishop Lee, it's a joy to have you with us.

Jeffrey Lee: Thank you.

Lydia Talbot: I must ask you to take us back on that journey at the time when your son Jonathan was born without a left hand. In many respects, that event helped redefine your sense of faith.

Jeffery Lee: Absolutely.

Lydia Talbot: And understanding that only a suffering God can help. Can you talk about Jonathan now and how he's still teaching?

Jeffrey Lee: Jonathan is a sophomore in college and has been teaching me since the day he was born, clearly. When he was a young child and inevitably we encountered other children and their very abrupt questions and stares, Jonathan began to teach us about what it is to be comfortable in your own skin. A not untypical answer when some little kid would ask him, "What happened to your hand?" was simply and matter-of-factly, "I was born that way," sometimes followed with a quick, "Get over it!" And as he grew that sense of security in his own self, in his own skin—the skin into which he was born and occupies—taught me much about not needing to polish it up. We all have imperfections. We all have wounds. We all have parts of ourselves that we think are less presentable: parts of our personality, parts of our psyche. Life is not about keeping those things under careful wraps. Life, the spiritual life, life with God, I think, is about embracing them and allowing God to embrace them. I think that's central to the Christian message: in Christ, God has embraced the full range of human experience.

Daniel Pawlus: And yet it's a real challenge, isn't it, this idea of perfectionism. I loved that you spoke about this. It's something I certainly struggle with sometimes, too, thinking that if I can do

it well enough or refine it enough that there is some value in that. Do you think we're led to think that good church is a perfect goal for people in their experience, that they're there to refine themselves in a way rather than to come to God as a wounded person?

Jeffrey Lee: I do. I think a lot of Christianity for far too long has been a kind of self-improvement project. The Lambeth Conference this last summer, which gathers bishops from throughout the worldwide Anglican Communion at Canterbury, was led in retreat—the bishops were led in retreat—by the Archbishop of Canterbury who said something arresting and very important. He said that holiness does not depend on our moral perfection. Holiness is not something we get to achieve. Holiness is a matter of God reaching out to grasp us and to draw us into God's own project of making the world into the whole reality it's meant to be. We get to cooperate with that and as such, offering our best, offering the best of our gifts, working on ourselves. None of that is anti Christian. The mistake is thinking that that work is what brings the holiness about. Holiness is God's gift to us. Wholeness is God's gift. Health, *salvos*, all of those words are related. God's gift. And our response is a matter of accepting the gift that's on offer and cooperating with it. The energy comes from God.

Lydia Talbot: And God's intervention into the human condition, you were referring to earlier, promises to us that although God does not prevent disasters or death, but God is...

Jeffrey Lee: In them.

Lydia Talbot: ...always in them, present. God is not absent from those moments in our lives.

Jeffrey Lee: That's right.

Lydia Talbot: How did you and your wife together learn to trust the journey? And I wonder how your journey has changed and how the wounds have changed?

Jeffrey Lee: Those are very compelling questions. The first answer to how did we learn, how did we walk through it is very simple. It was the Church. It was the community of faith and church construed quite broadly. Not necessarily the people who were members of our parish, but the large group, circle of friends, some of whom practice their faith overtly, some of whom would be startled to hear us say they were people of faith, but they demonstrated it. And the way they came around us trying to surround us, not by telling us it was all right but simply by being there. I'll never forget the deep wisdom of a friend of mine—several years after Jonathan's birth—gave me, a young couple who had a baby girl who died very suddenly at ten days old. And talk about wounding! There is no way to describe or capture that kind of wound. I'll never forget. She said to me, "We didn't start to get through this—not get over it, you never get over it—into some kind of health again until we stopped wanting the pain to go away." It was a profoundly wise thing to say. The wounds of the risen Jesus in that story about Jesus and Thomas, he's risen but the wounds are still recognizably there. The wounds of having anything taken from you hardly ever go away if it's an important wounding, but they can cease bleeding to death. The scars are the sign and those you bear always. I think you bear them eternally.

Daniel Pawlus: I have to ask you, Jeff. These are wonderful, personal questions, but I want to pull out to a macro level a little bit. We've got about two minutes left. As a bishop, can you help us understand what's going on in the Episcopal Church with this schism and what do you think the future of that dialogue is? It's in the news. Anyone that's following this has an idea of what I'm talking about. What can you bring to it? You mentioned the Lambeth Conference. I'm sure there was a lot of discussion.

Jeffrey Lee: One of the things I learned at the Lambeth Conference was the importance, now more than ever, of face-to-face dialogue between parts of the world that find our different cultural, social worldview contexts almost unimaginable. I said to a friend recently that interacting with bishops from certain parts of Africa and trying to have a conversation about our different perspectives on social issues, theological issues, I realized with a start that we were living on different planets! The friend of mine said, "That's why interplanetary travel is more important than ever!" And you can't do it on the Internet. So much of the division in our church, and I think more broadly, is being fueled by a kind of irresponsible use of the instant technology. We know more about each other today within in seconds than ever before. And the kind of face-to-face trust building, relationship building, there is no substitute for that in the flesh, face to face. We've got to do much more of that. I think we're discovering the full richness of the global reality. I think we have to stop trying to change each other and learn more about each other. The Anglican Communion that the Episcopal Church is a part of is as much of immersing post-modernity, that deeply diverse world, as any other organization or church.

Lydia Talbot: We are grateful for your amazing leadership and vision, Bishop Jeffrey Lee.

Jeffrey Lee: Thank you.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: We turn now to the final reflection in our yearlong series on the "Fruits of the Spirit." Today, Rabbi Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, reflects on kindness.

REFLECTION

Michael Siegel: The Rabbis taught that the world rests on three things: faithful prayer, ritual practice, and acts of kindness. To understand what they were attempting to teach, imagine a three-legged stool. If you take any of the legs away it cannot stand. This lesson reveals a great truth about any religion. Prayer has great meaning to people and acts of ritual lead us to moments of deep sanctity. Both enrich the spiritual life of the individual. But if our religious practices do not lead us to acts of kindness, then the three-legged stool will collapse, and the world will suffer as a result. The true measure of prayer or religious practice is how it affects the lives of others than your own.

CLOSING

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Michael, and our thanks again to Jeffrey Lee, Shakeela Hassan and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Lydia Talbot.

Daniel Pawlus: And I'm Daniel Pawlus. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and an extensive collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.