

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham, associate minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 8, July 26, 2009, and dedicated to the glory of God!*

## **“The Miracle in Letting Go”**

### **2 Kings, 4:42-44; John, 6:1-21**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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I'd like to tell a tall tale about one time when I was fishing with Dick Wing and Ron Jenkins, two of my colleagues when I worked at First Community Church.

We rowed into the lake, but Dick said we had forgotten our lunch. We went back to the dock, got our lunch and ate it. We rowed out into the lake again, but Ron realized we had forgotten the bait and tackle box.

He asked me to get it, and I stepped out of the boat and walked across the water, got the tackle box and bait, and walked back to the boat. Ron looked at Dick and said, “Wow! She can't even swim!”

There are expectations put on each of us. The scripture tells us of Jesus having the faith to feed 5,000 people with the loaves and fishes. He walked on water. The people wanted to make him king. But he refused, telling them that their faith is what is important.

We put Jesus in a building – worship and praise him and then go out about our business as if this is the only place where God is. I do not believe God wants our praise as much as we need to give it.

So what is it that God wants from us? I believe that God wants faith and trust and for us to care for each other and the world. We know that just because we claim to be religious doesn't mean we are. Or claiming to be spiritual has little value, because it is in the acting out of our faith that we become spiritual.

First I'd like to talk about religion and spirituality, then living our love of God and others.

Religion and spirituality are important. But spirituality is not religion. Religion is solid, tangible, maybe even predictable. In religion we seek to learn; we practice rituals that make us comfortable; we pray and sing and take communion; we may or may not learn from the sermon.

But just because we are religious, doesn't mean that we have faith or are spiritual. Spirituality is facing the unknown and beyond the ordinary, never exactly what we expect. Our doubt comes from fear, moving into the unknown, letting go planning our lives.

In growing up, we learn from our parents. When we are little, no matter what they do, that is all we know. Tools for living around us are revolutionary. So much has changed in the last 100 years that it is frightening. As we grow older, concepts change as our world expands. New inventions make revolutionary tools of our times obsolete.

We stick with what we know: for people like us, it's customs, the God of our parents knowledge.

To be spiritual, we must let go of planning the outcome of everything. The spiritual is beyond our control. Not beyond our reach, but beyond our control.

We can't hold it in our hands, touch it, or manipulate it, or destroy it. Faith is beyond "possession." We can't lock it up, own it, divide it among ourselves, or take it away from others.

Being spiritual is living in wholeness; living with the good and bad; living in imperfection; letting go of our expectations for the outcome of everything.

As our memories of the past fade, we bring forth what is comfortable. We try to hold on rather than let go and experience something new, claiming "we can't learn new tricks."

Growing spiritually is being able to move ahead. Letting go of fixed concepts, bringing what we can to build on for the future. Being spiritual is giving ourselves away once we have found a peace. Not in knowing, but in risking.

Often we come to church to fixate on the rituals, leave feeling filled, only to plan the week to come back again without giving our love away. Being spiritual is risking to give away, not know what the outcome will be. Our own spirituality is deepened by our ability to let go, to be free of the need to control the outcome of a situation. Sometimes it is the most unpleasant, sometimes it is the best. The miracles happen when we let go: of feeling sorry for ourselves, of never seeing the best. Even the smallest miracle can change our lives if we recognize it.

I am reminded of the life of Miss Lilly. She was an elderly woman in a nursing home and not a pretty sight. Her hair stuck out, she drooled and laid back in a chair each day without communicating a word. She had one living relative, a niece who came once a month and told her, "Your check came. Your bill is paid," and then promptly left. There was no touch, no care in her voice. No wonder Miss Lilly has chosen to retreat from the present and live in oblivion.

Joyce was a caregiver who in her youth did not like to visit nursing homes and found the elderly boring. Much to her surprise, the first job she was offered was in a nursing home. She went there

to make money – she stayed there to love the unlovable. Without planning, her spirituality deepened.

Joyce found a newness to life. Loving never knows what the future will bring. Of Miss Lilly she wrote:

*I touched her hand and spoke her name,  
The tired eyes opened wide.  
I looked and saw within their depths  
The loneliness inside.  
I clasped her fragile hand in mine,  
My warmth took off the chill.  
The love she put inside my heart  
I share with others still.*

There was a Montana family – mom, brother and sister – who went to visit Los Angeles. One morning, the mom and her daughter went on a bus to see some of the sights. The bus came to the end of its route in a seedy-looking area.

They got out of the bus fearful, looking for another bus. They ran into a homeless man with long stringy hair and dirty clothes, who asked them for money. The mom looked at the man closely and realized it was her brother, a Vietnam veteran who came back broken. The mom opened her arms and hugged him. He said, “What are you doing here?”

Do you believe in miracles – even the small ones in your everyday life? We do not have to walk on water or feed 5,000 people to experience a miracle.

Loving the inside of someone seemingly unlovable is letting go of our expectations. Doubt and fear cloud our faith. We can blame our upbringing, our personality type, our circumstance, or we can learn about and accept our imperfections as part of life, and open ourselves to the unknown.

Being always right and striving for perfection is the most tragic human mistake. The next tragic thing that can happen is for us to believe that our rituals and coming to church constitute spirituality.

Religion is not necessarily spirituality. Wholeness that God intended – giving to people like Miss Lilly with little reward, opening to new adventure, letting go of selfishness to risk new things, to go to a new place and find someone least expected.

God is with us in our doubt, in our fear. Are we willing to go out from here to risk, or are we held back by excuses and fear. What miracles can you see in your life this week?

Calls that I make take so little time. Letting go of myself deepens my spiritual being, enhances my journey toward wholeness. I am truly blessed when I do not know the outcome, when I cannot control my own destiny. Let us pray.

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