

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham, minister for pastoral care at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 15, 2009.

“Diamonds in the Core of Life”

Mark 1:40-45

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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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Once upon a time, which is to say, at every time, there was a king who commanded one of his subjects to bring him an apple every day for a year. The subject who brought the apple was a wise old woman who grew the apples herself. In his arrogant way, the king had quite refined tastes, having been educated in the upper crust, so he looked down his nose at this ordinary apple. He had one of his advisors throw each one into a shed.

One day, before the apple was thrown out, the king’s monkey went into the shed, took the apple, and ate it. When he got to the core, out dropped a large diamond. The king was astounded. He yelled at his advisor who ran out to the shed, and there in the rotting pulp were many, many diamonds. Amazing!

Though your taste may be refined, you have the gift of days, of people, of your experience. And if you’re not too proud to look, God gives you a jewel in everything and everyone you meet. But who does look for gems in everything? We think the answers are out there in more money, or in being successful or respected, in having everyone happy. We spend our time checking the news of the

world, or reading books or newsletters as though the good news were there. We turn to the Bible for insights. ***And we utterly overlook the apples, the gifts that God daily gives us, and throw them away in a back room of memory!***

Look at and listen to your life. We are asked by Christ to listen, to pay attention, to wake up to the tremendous realities that are at hand. One way to do that may be to look at our life of faith. Sometimes God's blessings arrive incognito, even disguised as misfortune, defeat, rejection, affliction, distress or anxiety. But in my daily life, most often the diamonds, or gifts of the day, come from those most afflicted.

The term *leprosy* in biblical texts likely refers to a number of skin diseases, and not Hansen's disease. In Jesus' day, people with leprosy were cut off from the normal activities of the community. People believed it was hazardous to touch one with a skin disease. Healing from such a disease meant restoration to life within the community.

When we were starting hospice in Seattle many years ago, AIDS was just being diagnosed. There were so many unknowns about the disease, and the reaction to it was very much like what I imagine it was to leprosy as described in our Mark scripture. Few wanted to work with a person diagnosed with aids. Fear? Prejudice? Perhaps ignorance? Or maybe a combination of all of those feelings. What was rejection doing to those persons – the pain of the disease and the emotions together? For some, throwing out the beautiful apple also lost the diamond inside. I was so proud of a few who put away fear and embraced being with these men with AIDS, giving them the last precious gift of their lives, the care and love they deserved.

Our gifts, the diamonds we seek from others, are: Respect, allowing dignity of those with less than we have or more than we

have, even when they act arrogant. We also expect to let go of fear of another with a disease we do not understand.

I remember visiting a member of a church I served when he was in the hospital. He had a flesh-eating disease, and it scared me. You know what a “hugging” person I am, but I was afraid of this terribly contagious disease – maybe like the leprosy in Jesus’ time. He eventually had to have both legs amputated – and I could hug him again. But I never forgot the shame I felt for my inability to get close when he had the actual disease.

Perhaps we cannot have grand moments where we actually hear the voice of God like Jesus did, nor see the bright light indicating God’s presence. However, God is present in those moments of simple caring and kindness. We may not even recognize it as God’s gift until we have thrown the apple away, to later see the diamond inside. Or perhaps as we give up our fears and prejudices about leprosy, or disease, we get many more gems than we give.

Following Mother Theresa’s example, she says, “Be the living expression of God’s kindness: kindness in your face, your eyes, your smile. Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier.”

Discovering the diamond in the apple core takes giving of ourselves, no matter what our status in life. We often listen for acts of kindness from famous people and get disappointed. But a woman in the New Orleans airport was waiting for a flight to Houston in order to attend her father’s funeral. She was overwhelmed with tears and sadness, and she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, and a voice asking her if he could do anything to help her in her sadness. She turned to him, and there was Kevin Costner reaching out to her.

God's blessings can be there for each one of us – in times of trouble and in good times. Those of us who are not in pain can reach out. The diamond will be in the core of the person we're caring for. Not only do we live kindness and caring, knowing we will find the unexpected blessing by doing so, we also live thanksgiving.

There is nothing easier than to thank God when something good happens to us. But to thank God for challenges that help us to grow – especially when we are watching a loved one die, or our own body is wracked with pain, or when we are going through a divorce, or have lost our job – thanking God is not so easy. But if we can look back and think about the events of our lives that have brought blessings through the pain, we will remember that we are closer to our friends and family when we have shared tough times as well as good. When we have learned what it means to be in pain, we know how to hold another who is in pain.

Our scripture today reminds me of the importance of finding moments of joy and treasuring them. It reminds me, when I think of the story of the king and the apple, the importance of getting to the core, the inside, to find the diamond, the beauty. It reminded me of the importance of giving thanks in the midst of that joy and in the midst of the pain. It reminds me of giving respect and dignity by honoring the personhood of another.

Perhaps it is time for each of us to realize that buried in the strange twists and turns that our own lives take and in the lives of others, there are ample gifts – diamonds – waiting to be discovered. We only need to recognize them.

Let us pray.

God of grace, we give you thanks. Thanks for freedom, for blessings disguised as other things. Thanks for the simplicity of abundance – not in the things we own, but in people we know and

love, hold and listen to. Stretch us beyond what we perceive to be our best. Amen.

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