

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham, Minister for Pastoral Care, of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 21, 2008.

***“When We Least
Expect It”***

Ephesians 6, 10-20

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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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The Israelites in exodus were complaining about their situation. And then, when they least expected it, meat and bread were provided.

The Christian is to be armed with the strength God supplies and to maintain a vigil of prayer both for self and for others.

What are we doing to protect our souls from unseen dark forces or our own neglect?

In Ephesians, there is an imagery of a holy war and spiritual armament. The people of that day understood that language, that analogy, because that was the armament of the wars of the times. Paul tells the church at Ephesus not to let doubt and darkness overtake them in their faith. He is instructing the people on how to arm themselves as Christians – with preventative measures to nurture their souls and to become as Christ for each other.

The scripture goes on to say that our enemies are not of flesh and blood, but a spiritual depletion. When we take too much time to live in fear of being devastated from the outside, we can tighten a noose around our soul. We need to seek a balance in the care of the outside and the inside.

We have had quite a week haven't we? We know what it is like to be without light – a good example for us to imagine what happens when darkness comes on the inside. All of this was so unexpected. We couldn't prevent it. We could only respond to what hit us and do little about the darkness. What most of us did:

- * Pick up debris
- * Help our neighbors
- * Clean up trees that blocked our path
- * Share our water so others could shower, and our food so others could eat.

We were forced to let go of the usual, to be creative. Our kids were out of school, but I imagine most of them learned lessons about life without buttons to push and the Internet to explore. They probably learned a lot from each of our interactions and actions to the outside world. How we responded to these outside forces is much like the way we respond to spiritual depletion and renewal.

I can go only so long with enthusiasm, then when frustration sets in, it comes out in absurd ways. I broke a fingernail so badly that my finger bled – it hurt – and I sat down and cried. Now I’m not much of a crier, so I know it was all the frustration piled up inside me. I didn’t need anyone at that moment to remind me of how much worse it would have been if we had also been flooded. Of course it would have, but I didn’t want to hear it at that moment.

To get our balance is to recognize that our faith can waver in times of stress, yet the more we build on our strength from God’s love and

share that love with others, the more we will have light and nurture in our souls. We all face things differently – some with great patience, some with anxiety and some with calmness. The nurture Paul speaks of is for all – no matter one’s stage of growth and light.

Most of us in our childhood participated in contests where the coach or timer would say, “Ready, set, go!” Usually our goal for the outcome of the contest was the same, so we would follow the rules.

One summer two of my grandchildren, Alex and Maddie, were visiting me and we swam in the neighborhood pool often. Alex, who was 10, and Maddie, who was 5, along with neighbor Stephanie, who was 3, were jumping and playing together. Alex was usually the director and he lined them up on the side of the pool to say ready, set, go, and have a little contest.

They agreed, and just as he said “ready”, 3-year-old Stephanie jumped in. Maddie, being confused and not wanting to lose, jumped in at “set”, and frustrated Alex jumped in at “go!” Even with the same goal, we react differently. Some are ready before others, some are confused by the actions of others and others follow the rules. Things happen when we least expect it!

Many will have different interpretations of the instructions and be in different stages of nurture when it comes to caring for the soul. In the church community, we are much like a family. And we resemble the “ready, set, go” of the pool. We face life’s joys and sorrows together, we share an often unspoken but unmistakable love for one another. When someone in this family of faith has a crisis, such as an illness or a loss, we form a circle of care.

It is in these times we truly become like the Christ for each other, reaching out a loving hand, or receiving one, not in judgment but humility and caring. I find that in crisis there are some who gladly accept the tidal wave of love and support from the church family, and others who struggle with the grace of it all and need some time away before they return to us. And there are some who can give but not receive. Which one are you? The circle never seems to leave but is ready to enfold each one.

We all have a choice in how we receive the love that nourishes our soul, as well as how we give it out, how we face difficulty.

A young woman was discouraged and seeking answers because nothing seemed to be

going right. She went to her mother with a despondent attitude and said she didn't know how to live any more. Her mom took her to the kitchen where she filled three pots with water, placed them on a high fire that brought them to a boil. In the first pot she placed carrots. In the second she placed eggs, in the third some herbal tea leaves. She said nothing as they boiled, and in about 20 minutes, turned off the burners, fished out each content and placed them in bowls.

Turning to her daughter she said, "Tell me what you see." Carrots, eggs and tea! The mom brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots that were soft. The egg she broke and peeled, and observed the hard-boiled content inside. She smelled the rich aroma of the tea and tasted it.

Each of the objects had faced the same adversity – boiling water – but each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting in the boiling water, its inside became hardened. The herbal tea leaves were unique. After they were in boiling water, they changed the water.

We can each ask ourselves: Am I a carrot that seems strong but with pain and adversity, do I wilt and become soft and lose my strength? Am I the egg that starts with a malleable heart, but changes with the heat? Did I have a fluid spirit but after a death, a breakup, a financial hardship or other trial, have I become hardened and stiff? Does my shell look the same, but on the inside am I bitter and tough with a stiff spirit and hardened heart? Or am I like the herbal tea leaf? The leaf actually changes the hot water and the very circumstances that bring the pain. When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and the flavor. Do I change myself to receive the situation and make it better? We are all different, yet we have choices to help us through, and God's love never fails when we open our hearts to receive it.

We are not called to face things alone. There are many times when I have been like the egg with a hard shell around me, especially when I cannot feel God's presence in the power of prayer. The scripture tells us to pray in spirit at all times. When we are faced with a major problem, yes, we can choose our actions, but it certainly helps to have prayers surrounding us and giving us strength.

And wouldn't it be wonderful to feel the source of life within us at all times? When I was a small child, my dad was very crippled, bent over and in pain and could hardly walk. One lady at the church told my mom that if he had not sinned he would be well. I was very angry with her and with God for a while. Soon I let go and talked to God in the sky (where I thought God was) and told God to bop that woman on the head. My daddy could not be evil!!!

Oh what perceptions we have! This is where the community of faith around us is so important. There are times when we need others to affirm what we believe, others who seek to know God also, and to help our children in their perceptions of God.

What is prayer and what is the answer? Don't you just want to shout at God sometimes and say, "Where are you?" It becomes confusing when we believe that prayer is only words. Talking is only part of prayer. We talk to unburden our hearts, to come clean before God. When all of our words run out, when we are scraping the bottom of our verbal barrels, and all that is left are some inarticulate longings, that is when we can know the spirit really begins to work. We've been looking for the wrong experience in prayer. When we stop talking, let

go and listen, even if we cannot define it, we can feel a presence in a calming way.

Bishop Spong has helped me define for myself what prayer is to me and maybe this will be helpful to some of you.

Prayer for me is: the offering of my life and love to others, to hold them, to share strength, to surround them with my care and courage.

Prayer for me is: giving myself, maybe in discomfort, for the sake of standing with others to create justice.

Prayer for me is: the ability to embrace the fragility of life as it comes and be there with others when it comes for them.

Prayer for me is: letting go of the delusion that an external deity will save me and not save someone else beside me.

And most of all, prayer for me is: listening, being quiet, trusting that the source of life is always with me. Presence far outweighs words, fixing things.

What are we doing to protect our souls from unseen dark forces and our own neglect?

Hopefully we are putting on the armor of spiritual strength with righteousness and truth.

Hopefully we are walking in the way of peace.

Hopefully we are recognizing the wonder of the grace of God.

Hopefully we are praying, each one in our own way, for ourselves and each other.

The source of life is always present to nourish our souls, even when we least expect it. Amen.

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