Christ United Methodist Church
Sermons on the web

Matthew 13: 45 - 46

Precious

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One of the gifts of being family - blood family or affiliative family - is that you come to share stories and you can make each other laugh with a raised eyebrow or a word.

As I was raising my children, a word that would cut tension and make us laugh was this:

"Precious"

As in THE precious - as in the ring that Bilbo Baggins was seeking in the Lord of the Rings.

The Gollum - a creepy kind of tunnel creature wants that ring and becomes obsessed with having the ring that will give him immortality -

he wants the precious.

So whenever my children really wanted something - whether it was wise for them to want it or not - all they had to do was refer to the precious.

And we all knew what they wanted something badly in an achy kind of way.

Maybe being able to name it in a caricatured way made the wanting sting less.

I am so moved that Jesus uses a merchant in scripture to teach us what the kingdom of God is like.

Merchants - like Samaritans last week - were not esteemed. And the merchant, once giving all his goods away to procure the precious, becomes no longer a merchant.

His name is changed. He is not longer a merchant. He is the one who gave everything for that which he saw as precious. (concept taken from Amy Jill Levine's book The Stories of Jesus)

His story is our own.

Whether our names change because we now own a dog or birthed a baby or were diagnosed with cancer and are seeking survivor status or are owning our addictions or we are retired or we are widowed or we are whatever this world thought it could define us as

Like the merchant, we know that there are times in life when profound shifts happen.

Sometimes we get to choose our identity shifts.

Sometimes we do not.

At all times, Jesus is teaching, we who seek to live into God's vision of the kingdom -

We get to choose what it is we will give our all to - we get to name what is precious and live in such a way that we create life and meaning and beauty here on this earth.

The kingdom of heaven is like that.

A clergy friend of mine in Duluth was diagnosed years ago with breast cancer.

She is the kind of pastor who gives and gives and gives and suddenly she was forced to grapple with her own vulnerability and her own mortality.

She who had sat with many women and their families as they dealt with cancer was now unsure about how to be.

I share with you a recent reflection shared in the Duluth newspaper:

I've been the pastor of my church for 27 years, ever since I moved here. October is always hard for me because it's Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Seventeen years ago I was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer. When I think about that event I think about how critical the congregation was in my healing. As a pastor you often offer words of encouragement and hope to people going through difficult times. But to be on the receiving end was really pretty overwhelming.

When I found a lump I didn't do anything right away because my mammogram had been normal. Finally a member of the church, who also happens to be a physician, said I needed to get it biopsied. She went with me when I had that biopsy. It should have been a clue to me that it wasn't going to be good news – when a physician takes the day off to go with you. I was blessed that she pushed me to do that because it turned out to be cancer. I had a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy.

Someone had asked me what the hardest part of this process would be and I said losing my hair. Two weeks after I started chemotherapy my hair began to fall out. It's so visual when that happens because people know you're ill.

I didn't want to be defined by what was going on, by this cancer. Two families who I had been with when they lost their children planned an event called BALD: Brave – Adventurous – Loving – Daring. I knew nothing about it. After church they invited everyone downstairs. They had pictures of Mr. Clean, Sinéad O'Connor and others hanging on the walls. They served hard boiled eggs for lunch and thirty five people shaved their heads; they had taken pledges to raise money for the American cancer society. That amount of support was overwhelming and I realized then I wasn't alone.

The care we received from that point on just continued. I had 6 or 8 months of chemo. I got chemotherapy on a Monday so I could be better by Sunday to preach. People brought food on Monday for my family. They knew I didn't have any energy on that day and would be too ill to cook. We fondly called it the "jello parade" and we were

nourished for almost a year.

There is a great quote by Annie Lamott: "It's the nature of life that lives and hearts get broken. Sometimes the world feels like the waiting room of the emergency ward, and we who are more or less OK for now need to take the tenderest possible care of the more wounded people in the waiting room until the healer comes. Our job is to sit with people, get them juice and graham crackers."

I felt like people sat with me. We're not the healer, we're not God, but we can sit with each other until the healer comes. The blessing for me was that I had offered that to so many people and now I was overwhelmingly on the receiving end.

Life is hard and no-one is immune from that. We help each other through and offer healing by just sitting and not trying to answer the "why" questions. Church is the people that we walk with, not the building.

-Kathy Nelson. Peace UCC, Duluth

So.

Today marks the beginning of a series of weeks when we consider stewardship - what it means to be a part of a people who bless.

My prayer is this:

That through this church we help each other to learn about and live through the searching for and the finding of the precious.

Life happens. Sometimes we choose transformation and sometimes transformation chooses us.

And.

We get to sit with each other.

We get to raise each other - whether we are baby Zo's age or we are eighty.

The kingdom of God is like that.

Amen

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