

## Gems in the Rough

Good morning. It is nice to be back in San Diego. I already know a few of you, but I think I still have about 890 or so folks to get to know. I guess I have my work cut out for me. Since you may have read my bio in the church newsletter, I don't want to just stand up here and repeat it. But... I should tell you a little bit about me. Before grad school, my professional life was mostly spent working as a nurse (as a civilian and in the Navy) and in social services. And then, for a short time, I owned an art gallery in North Park. Although I felt a call to ministry as far back as my teen-ager days, it took me over 20 years to learn that I really could meld my spiritual and professional lives. My academic studies have included the arts, nursing and medical technology, administration and humanities. I hold a Master's degree in Humanities and Leadership, and as you probably expect from an Intern Minister, I'm almost done with a Master of Divinity at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. My life's spiritual explorations have been a meandering path through Baptist Christianity, nature-based spirituality or Paganism, Zen Buddhist meditation and Unitarian Universalism. What else can I tell you about me? I love my cat, and I have a few hobbies, such as reading, writing and various artistic pursuits. One of those artistic pursuits, **Lapidary**, is the art of stone-cutting. Turning rocks into gems. Today, I'm going to use the lapidary arts as a metaphor for life in general, and my life in particular.

Some people might say that "*gems in the rough*" are a bit cliché. But the idea behind this cliché really is a wonderful metaphor. Imagine walking along a path, and you notice this rock along the way. It is an ugly rock, not much to make it stand out. But, for some reason, you pick it up and take it home. Later, you somehow break it open, because you want to see what is on the inside. *Oh, wow!* You never imagined that the inside was beautiful – maybe you found

crystals growing, or interesting patterns, or just colors that go well with your living room décor. Some people, like me, find these hidden gems to be fascinating. These are nature's works of art... some might even say God's or Goddess' art...

That reminds me of something *else* that has always fascinated me – the spiritual meaning found in art. I've heard some people compare the spark of creativity with the spark of the Divine. Artists through the ages have taken that spark, and created art for the sake of creating. This act of creation is, in my mind, a form of worship. Now... some might say that creating art, like writing fiction, is just "*make-believe*." Less charitable people, so serious in their staid, pragmatic lives, might call such things "*delusional*." Art isn't "real life," after all... "*You should be doing something useful with your time!*" Or, how about: "*You're studying for the ministry? Would you like fries with that?*" (Whew! I'm sorry, I didn't realize I'd be channeling my uncle in the service today.) I wonder, do they have it all wrong? I have to tell you that I often duke this one out within myself – I have a very pragmatic side, and an artistic side, and sometimes they don't ...

play ... nice.

The creative impulse can seem like a burst of electricity to some artists, powering them to work feverishly until the image has attained physical form. For many an artist, once an image or idea has gotten stuck in her head, she can't rest until she gets the image out. First she must choose her medium – and this is where the sacred act of creation begins. Whether it is a blank page or canvas, or a lump of clay, an un-sculpted block of rock or loose weaving yarn, it almost seems like the artist is gathering up dust to mold the figure of man. The critical eye of the artist can see the image trapped within the medium before them, and it is up to the artist to release that image from the medium. All media, before they have been touched by the creative spark, are

like the gem in the rough.

For me, I start with some rock, then I spend hours cutting and grinding, shaping and polishing, until the inner beauty is released. For any artist, by directing the creative spark onto their chosen medium, I can't help but thinking that whatever is created really is a sacred image. While not all art has a religious theme, that act of creation seems very sacred to me – almost a worshipful act. Combining the intention of the artist with the creative spark and the love he pours into his art, creates a divine synergy. This is what I think of as Art. It was to support that synergy that I once opened an art gallery for spiritual and visionary artists.

Some people might not know that I was attempting to approach my work at the gallery as a spiritual practice – which may explain why I wasn't the greatest businessman. While I owned my business, I was very aware of the justice in paying an artist appropriately for their talent and time.... Their blood, sweat and tears while creating their art. It is a great conundrum of the art world, that people love art, but are unwilling to pay artists what they are worth. Just look at the hand-sculpted statuary from Bali that you can find in most import stores. Or, we jewelers think about what it means to buy Blood Diamonds. John has been talking to us about worker justice and living wages – I want to lift up that this is as much a global issue, as it is a local issue.

But, I digress. There I was, in my gallery, with the pragmatic and artistic parts of me *in tension*... I believe that handicrafts and works of art are extensions of the Divine at work in the world. However, I want you to know that I don't think one has to be an *Artiste* to worship in this way. Simply taking the time to really contemplate a work of art ... **is** ... a way of meditating. Have you ever tried that? Just spending time with art is worship, in a way. I invite you to give it a try – it's nice that we have a gallery right over in Bard Hall.

Here's another way to think about it. Think of music, as if it were magic. The fiddles are squealing, the drums beating the rhythm of your heart... In a dream of synesthesia, I imagine the notes of music as colors, swirling around me... Musical raindrops become paint drops on the canvas, with more grace than Jackson Pollock. The sine waves of sound become waves of color washing over me like ocean waves. Chords crackle like lightning, but not like thunder. And then... I'm "*pulled from the wreckage of my silent reverie...*" (as Sarah McLachlan would say.) Many of you may have already discovered how mindfulness and music and art can work together to achieve a worshipful experience. We see this in many congregations, to one degree or another, during our Sunday services.

Earlier, Liz told a story about a king and his diamond. I'd like to share the story of a princess and her jewels – it's really a story about creativity and brazen, bold and collaborative artistry. It seems that people often think of jewelry and gems in terms of royalty. Sometimes, though, the royalty are not some distant fairytale people. Like the time that this one young lady, showing solidarity with people living with HIV & AIDS, helped create an alternative prom here in San Diego County. She came dressed to the nines, of course. She wore a tasteful little black number, with heels, autumn tones for her accessories and an auburn wig. You're thinking, *Did he just say, "wig"?* You see, this was Mitsy's first, *and only*, appearance in "drag." She only did this to support a good cause, supporting the local HIV community. She was crowned a princess that night, much to her – or his – chagrin. All those sparkly rhinestones on the tiara – "*ooh... shiny,*" says the magpie. *I believe that we often make our own royalty, but that's a topic for a whole different sermon.* Here's my point about Mitsy – she was no career drag queen, experienced in performing Diana Ross songs. She didn't even know how to do her own make-up, or how to walk in heels, or anything. She only wanted to do something to support this

special event. So, she enlisted help. Lots of help. People to help her shop, to do her make-up, to practice walking and talking like a woman. I'll never reveal the true identity of Mitsy, but I will say that... *she*... learned many lessons. She started out as a “gem in the rough,” who needed the help of many experts to ‘polish’ her new image. Just pretending to be another person for the evening gave her a new appreciation for the lives of others, especially people with HIV, and also women, in general... She couldn't have learned all there is to know about being a woman in our society today, but she certainly became more empathetic concerning societal expectations for external beauty that are placed on women today. Oh, I know that “*beauty on the inside*” is yet another cliché we hear, yet our metaphor of rough gems hiding the jewel within is very apropos, don'tcha think?

Another gem that often pops up in my conversations are pearls of wisdom... pearls are a gem that are always in the rough, they are not something that we usually want to cut open, because that would ruin them. Pearls of wisdom, likewise, are little bits that others share with us, that are precious all by themselves, and don't need to be dissected to be meaningful to us. These are some of my favorite gems, found in the people around me. While I was spending the summer as a hospital chaplain, I worked with a Catholic priest who was very quiet, observant and wise. When I would least expect it, after listening to our chaplaincy group for an hour, he would suddenly share a pearl of wisdom that would just floor us all. Suddenly, whatever dilemma we were discussing seemed easily addressed, easily attainable. In this example, the gem is *wisdom* instead of *beauty*, but the premise is the same – it is often hidden inside, unseen, until the time is right to reveal the gem to everyone's sight.

Well, before I go too far, and get too academic with my art (*too late?*) – I am reminded that this sermon is supposed to introduce you to me. I know about myself that I'm not an

extroverted person. So, many of the interesting things about me – the *facets* of my personality, if you will – are things that I keep to myself, until I get to know someone. Now, I'm learning how to get to know a large group – a congregation – instead of a many individuals, and this is a new way of thinking for me. So, I'll end with a few words about my values.

You can probably tell that creativity is one of my most cherished values – creating a worshipful and sacred space for services are one way that I can share my creative spark with you. Another thing I value is my spirituality. I can tell you, my past career as a nurse did not allow my creativity and spirituality to flow. It was important work, but also very pragmatic and routine. At certain points in my career, I also found myself engaged in a great deal of administrative tasks, though I'm good at that. However, I missed the artsy-fartsy stuff from my youth. I most enjoyed my life when I was part of a theatrical production or an art show. In ministry, I strive to join my creativity, spirituality and, yes, even my administrative skills, into a career that is fulfilling to me, and hopefully of service to others, such as yourselves. May we have a brilliant year together. Blessed be!