

Did anyone take Margaret's invitation to think about your spiritual gifts last week? ____ Anyone want to share? _____ Anyone have a weakness come up while they were searching their soul for a strength? Take a minute and jot down a weakness on one side of your index card and a strength on the other.

In the early days of coal mining, actually, well into the 1900's, miners would take a caged canary down the seam with them. Canaries, you see, sing pretty continuously. They are incredibly sensitive little birds, and react to any changes in air chemistry. If the canary stopped singing, you needed to find the problem quickly. If the canary died, you just got out. These fragile little birds were the most sensitive creature in the mine. They had the strongest ability to sense danger, making them essential. But their ability to use that sense for their own good was taken completely away from them, caged as they were, and so they died.

No one blamed the canary for dying. No one told the canary to be stronger. Take nice, shallow breaths. Suggested to the canary that if only it exercised more to build lung capacity it would have been fine. The miners were thankful to the canary, who had given its life saving theirs.

Too bad we don't treat people more like canaries.

The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, Paul tells us. Those we perceive as needy, what if they are the givers and we the receivers? There goes the gospel again, turning all of our ideas upside down.

When I went to seminary I also gained a new identity – welfare mom. I went from being a model suburban, white, educated woman home with her kids and driving the required mini-van to being a statistic. My brownness, which is usually just enough to make me a wee bit exotic, became a far more pronounced part of my life – from the outside in. It was one more lever to use to make me fit a single stereotype. Humans will do a lot to avoid ambiguity. But that's another sermon. Mostly. I was hunted down, by investigators showing up while I was at work to prove my poverty. I was referred to by number by caseworkers who wouldn't look me in the eye. I was demeaned, belittled. Every life choice I made was open season for social services to question, judge, reward or punish. And, I need to be very clear about this, I had it easy. I am educated, smart, white by all but a slim thread, stubborn and resilient.

When I tell this story people who have never needed such help feel the need to console me, assuring me that I'm the exception, and not like the others who are part of a welfare culture, content to sit back and let others do everything

for them. But the truth is, I'm no different. Except, perhaps, I am the canary with the unusually large lung capacity and the louder than average song. When we are dealing with people we would much rather blame the canary than change the environment.

I am no different than any of the people I waited, and waited, and waited with, listening to each other be treated like less than human, trying to shelter our kids from the reek of superiority that hangs heavy in those rooms. There are lessons that we need from those places, beloved. And the wisdom and insight to be gained there, I don't know if we can read enough, sermonize enough, theorize enough to understand.

I am not ashamed that I needed help, sought it, refused whenever possible to be easily categorized or dismissed. I am grateful for the opportunities of understanding and empathy that they gave me. I am aware that I am lucky and blessed to have options, and I have a responsibility to do my best to tell the story of my sisters and brothers who are still trapped in the coal mine of our systems of injustice. I am privileged with the opportunity to change the coal mine rather than blame the canaries.

The systemic is personal and the personal becomes systemic. As individuals we have been taught to be self-sufficient, independent. We are all given the message that needing help makes you weak, inferior. We ask one another 'how are you?' And we answer 'fine!' How often have you done that when you were anything but fine? But it is the socially acceptable answer, isn't it? And so we give it, not wanting to single ourselves out as the weakest member of the pack.

We build our systems based upon these personal interactions. We create a welfare system that allows us to feel proud that we take care of those 'less fortunate' but do not require us to examine how they came to be less fortunate. We'll help you, from a distance. We know, instinctively, that need is contagious.

What we have failed to learn is what a holy and wonderful thing that is.

Let me say it again: a contagion, a viral outbreak of neediness would be the best thing for us all. We are all, in one way or another, canaries. We are all in the coal mines of the systems that we built, breathing air that is toxic, just trying to outlast one another. If we all saw each others need, I believe that we would, instead, get out of the mine and switch to solar power. The only thing that prevents us from doing so is that we aren't all vulnerable in the same way, so we can hide from one another.

Being a welfare mom wasn't the problem in my life. Having a system tell me what I needed, how I should get it, and how thankful for it I should be, that was. Neediness isn't a problem. Our reaction to it is. Needs tell us that something is wrong, and the quicker we fix it the better for everyone. Unmet needs will only continue to grow. And if we don't know the needs we can't meet them. And if we are too busy trying to be strong and independent, we come to believe that our need is a secret and shameful thing.

As a welfare mom, I was the needy one, right? I needed money, insurance, food. In return, I have the gift of insight about what is broken with our systems. Twana and Linda Loomis are nurses, with the gift of healing – and people will continue to get broken. Margaret, thanks be to God, has the gift of organization, and churches (and this pastor) get disorganized quickly. Lee has the gift of music, which is a balm for the soul. Marcus has the gift of unbridled charisma, and as he grows that will inspire people to do great things, I'm sure. I'll not presume to tell you their needs. But since they are living, breathing humans, I can guarantee they have them.

We are only complete when we allow ourselves to need each other and when we seek to bring our unique gifts to bear on meeting the needs of others. Gifts can only be shared in community, and needs can only be met in community. And the kin-dom of God is the community we are working toward, where all needs are met and all gifts are used. So every time we are too afraid to show our need we deny someone else the use of their gifts.

The personal is systemic and the systemic is personal: when we allow ourselves to be needy at the same time that we affirm our gifts and use them, we are practicing personally what we need to work on systemically. Systems, like coal mines, are dug by individuals and individuals need to help each other out.

Look at the federal employees. These folks have suddenly found themselves in the position of canary when they are employed to dig our systemic wells deeper. The systemic can get personal very quickly. And when it does, you begin to see that the whole mine is about to collapse. And when you sing like a canary, you will see how fast we turn to blame. Quit complaining – you can babysit and sell your things on EBay. It can't be the system that is wrong, it must be you.

As relatively financially secure, mostly white, educated people, we have been taught that we are not needy. That we are the rescue squad. And in some

ways, that may be true. But not in all ways. If we fail to embrace the need for greater understanding of experiences outside of our own, fail to humbly seek out what we do not know, that is not gospel living. It is digging the coal mine deeper and blaming the canaries when they can't breathe.

There are coal mines we as a nation hold in common. Race and our construction of it is the deepest, and it has branches that impact all the other coal mines deeply. We are all miners in the dark here, knowing the air isn't quite right. Our task now is to refuse to dig the mines any deeper and determine that we will all get out into the light of God together. Racism is our original sin, and we must do the work of repentance and repair, because I am fairly certain we will not be able to close off the other mines of injustice until we have dealt with this one. Black and brown people have and continue to be the canaries – the first to suffer from the air in this mine. But none of us can continue to breathe it now. It is simply too noxious.

In my life I have gained more opportunities to use my gifts, to grow in the spirit, to build the kin-dom by naming my needs than in any other way. I have learned more about my fellow humans. I have come to love them more deeply. It may be that sharing my need has, ultimately become my greatest gift.

I am not interested in building a better coal mine. I am certain that Jesus isn't looking for any more canaries. Canaries don't dig mines. Miners do – and miners, with the free will of God, have the ability to refuse to dig any more. I am interested in getting each and every one of us out safely and into the light of understanding – epiphany light – that is God's will for us.

If you wrote down a gift and a need and you feel so moved during our response hymn, bring them up. We'll put them in our little Jordan and ask God to bless them, and bless us with the courage and love to use both for God's service.