

From Agony to Ecstasy
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The scripture this morning is a paraphrase by Brother Ray. I hope you won't be offended by it, but anyway, if you want to read the real version you can look it up later. Anyway, these two dudes were walking along the road. They were just barely walking along the road. You know how you walk when you feel like you're carrying the burden of the world on your shoulders? That's the way they were walking. One of them said to the other, "Wow, just when we thought everything was going our way – into the pits." Now there was another guy walking along that same road, and he was walking in the same direction, and he was walking with a real spring in his step. I mean, he was having a happy day. He walked along and he caught up to them and he noticed – I mean, all you had to do was look at their faces and you knew that something was wrong, something very wrong. So he asked them about that, "What's going on?" They just poured out there story to him. It was a picture of agony. You could see the pain. Their future had all fallen apart.

Agony, we all know agony. How many of you are CSU football fans? Come on, I want to see your hands, how many of you are? I know there are a lot of you here. Do you know agony? This is an interactive message. It's all right to say "Yes!" or "Amen," you know. Now let's try that. Have any of you experienced agony? Thank you. That way I know you're still awake, because I can't see some of you. You know what? Not only have I experienced that agony, but I've carried guilt for it. Thirteen straight games, 378 days, because you know, I was in Falcon Stadium last year. Oh, we CSU fans were so excited. 21 to 3 at half-time. Then I went out to get something to eat and I saw the mascot Falcon, and I went over and petted the falcon's feathers, and that was it. Thirteen games, 378 days later, I'm still carrying the guilt for having done that, because I brought the Curse of the Falcons back to Fort Collins.

You know, agony comes to us in a lot of different ways. There was this guy who was on the airplane, he was sitting in the aisle seat, and across the aisle he saw a woman, and he saw that on her finger she had the biggest diamond he had ever seen in all of his life. I mean, it was big. So he said, "I can't help noticing that diamond on your finger. Tell me about it." She said, "Oh, well, it's the Klopman Diamond." "The Klopman Diamond, I've never heard of the Klopman Diamond," he said. "Is there a story connected with that diamond?" "Yes, yes, there's a curse connected with the diamond." "What's the curse?" She said, "Mr. Klopman."

Agony comes in all different ways. My little dog Calvin, he just weighs less than fifteen pounds, he's the sweetest dog you ever knew. Not as sweet as yours, of course. But he knows when I'm going to leave. Even before I have my coat on, pick up the car keys, or do anything, he knows. And he starts following me around and he's so close to me that sometimes I step on him. But that doesn't deter him. He'll paw at my leg, he'll go "ewww" you know, however dogs do whenever they're kind of, "Pay attention to me, I'm going too." After all of that he'll go and sit by the front door and wait for it to open

and for me to say, “All right, get in the car.” And when I don’t do that, and I leave and pull the door closed, I can hear him on the other side crying, yipping away, crying, and both of us, both Calvin and I, know agony. Agony.

It’s a woman in the eighth month of pregnancy, waiting, uncomfortable, wanting it to be over. It’s a couple getting word that they are not going to be able to have any biological children. It’s someone who receives word from the doctor: “The disease you have has no cure.” It’s the Finance Committee who, when you ask them about agony, they will tell you, “\$187,000, that’s the indebtedness still on the renovation of our facility.” You ask the business manager and you’ll be told, “It’s when there are more bills to be paid than there is money to pay them.” Agony. We experience it in a lot of ways in our lives.

Jesus knew agony. On the cross he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And the disciples knew agony when his body was taken from the cross, his lifeless body, and sealed in the tomb. Agony comes to us in so many ways. Here’s another way.

“According to your paperwork, you’ve been having trouble with stomach pain. Is it constant or intermittent?” “It’s off and on, but it’s been more intense lately.” “I see. Well, are there any other symptoms – fever, headache?” “No” “How about changes in diet, or exercise?” “No.” “Hmmm. Are you taking any over-the-counter medications?” “No, none.” “Hmmm. Is your family okay, work environment, social life?” “Yeah, they’re all fine.” “I see, I see. Well, are you overscheduled? How is your work schedule?” “Well, it’s the usual church stuff. Monday there’s a prayer meeting, Tuesday we have the women’s breakfast, Wednesday Stephen’s Ministry, Thursday is choir rehearsal, then of course there’s the services on Sunday.” “Sounds like you’re pretty busy then.” “More than usual this month – it’s Stewardship Month.” “Aha. I’m beginning to see a little bit of a pattern here. Is that the pain that you’ve been experiencing, and it’s gone now?” “Yes, it’s gone now.” “I see. Tell me Jill, do you tithe regularly?” “Yes, I give ten per cent every week.” “How about mission fund?” “Yeah, I do that.” “How about the building committee, the building fund?” “Awww.” “How about love offerings?” “Oh doctor, the pain is so intense, make it stop.” “Yes, yes, I believe I can help you here. I believe you have a case of gastroimpacitus offeritus.” “I’ve never heard of that.” “Well, it’s as common as a head cold and I’ve treated many people with these same symptoms.” “Gastro- what?” “It simply means that you aren’t giving with a cheerful heart. Remember, Second Corinthians 9:6 says that God loves a cheerful giver.” “What do I do for the pain? I’ll do anything you say, Doctor.” “I think we need to start by reading, five times daily, Second Corinthians 9:6, the part about “He who sows bountifully.” Then in the morning and the evening, I’d like for you to read First Chronicles, 29:3, “In my delight I give to the Lord” “Thank you, Doctor, I will follow your instructions.” “I think you will find immediate relief. And I’d like to see you again in two weeks.” “I’ll make an appointment. Thank you so much.” “Thank you. Such a simple treatment for such a serious ailment.”

They’re part of what we call the Act One Players, they often participate in our 12:15 Crosswalk service.

We all know something of agony. It comes in all different ways, some of them of little consequence, some of them of great consequence. The two dudes I told you about, that were walking along the road? They were in such agony, but then they finally realized that the third guy that was walking with them was the very one whose death had cast them into the deepest despair. When their eyes were opened to see who it really was, beyond the agony came the ecstasy. The ecstasy of discovering one whom they thought was dead, was alive and was right there with them. And what did they do? In their ecstatic state they started running, I mean running with faces aglow, with hearts pounding, they went running to tell others, “He’s not dead! He’s alive!”

Isn’t that the way it comes to us? I mean, when someone has been diagnosed with an illness that is very severe, and sees the doctor again, and the doctor says, “Your condition is in remission” – ecstasy! When the doctor says, “You have just delivered a beautiful little girl – no longer agony, ecstasy. Whenever the couple who could have no children finally get through all the paperwork, get through all the paperwork, get through all the interviewing and all the other things involved and finally have the day when they go and pick up the child and take that child home who will now be their child. Can you imagine such ecstasy? Ecstasy is often the postlude of the prelude of agony. And sometimes, it’s just a matter of being open to the gifts that come, that lift us out of the agony of life into the ecstasy of a future.

I want to tell you that I asked to preach on this Sunday a long time ago. I wanted to do a stewardship sermon. I’m sure you’re surprised at that. But you know, I wanted to talk with you a little bit about just what stewardship is because stewardship – now, don’t click your minds off – stewardship is using the gifts that God has invested in you and me, and in every single one of us God has invested gifts. It’s using those gifts, letting them be used so that we experience joy, but also so that the church can more fully be the people, the body of Christ that God wants us to be. And we’re given many gifts. Some of us are given gifts of visioning the future that God has. Some of us are given the gifts of business skills, some of us creative arts gifts, some of us are given the gifts of faith, of love, of evangelism, of generosity. I mean, the list could go on. But all of those gifts, when they are used, help the body of Christ, us, to be what God wants us to be. And that has to do with finances as well. It has to do with the financial resources with which God has blessed us. We as Christians do believe that all that we have has come from God, all that we are has come from God. And in the use of our resources financially, we don’t want to treat our giving as sort of giving a tip to God for good service. Our giving is to be a joyful investment of our financial resources in the most important ministry and mission that God has given to humankind, that of carrying out the gospel of peace – oh, does the world need peace – of love, of unity, of justice. That’s our mission, and I believe there is no greater mission on earth than that. I know it.

Thank God our ancestors in the faith did not think of giving of themselves in every way, time, talent, gifts, service, not as just a token gift or a tip to God, but an investment of their lives, because that is what has brought the church to where it is. Thank God that the pioneers of faith who were United Methodists here in Fort Collins invested themselves, not for what they could get out of it, but because of their faith in the future and for the

generations that would follow. We here at First United Methodist Church have gone through times of agony, haven't we? There have been times when, financially, all we were able to do was to try and maintain what was. In terms of the ministries of the church, just hanging on. But then something happened last year – I knew it was brewing – something happened last year, and in 2007 it's as though we reached, I'm not sure this is good, but a tipping point of agony and began to fall into the side of ecstasy. Things that have been going on and we've been talking about those, but you know a bell choir that plays magnificently at our worship, a sanctuary choir that has been exploding since James Kim has come here, not only in numbers but in quality, and I can tell you this, I believe this choir we have here is equal to any choir in the country, with the possible exception of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I thought I'd get some 'Amens' out of that – I like to hear response. Our adult ministries education program has been exploding. You got the book this year, all the things that are being planned. I mean, it's incredible, and some of them are bringing people from the community in to share in them with us. And our children's ministry, Sunday School, growing. The kids are excited to come to Sunday School. Youth program, the same way – growing not only in numbers but in depth. A chair lift that's made our facility fully accessible to all people, a Columbarium that is nearly fully funded, a second van to enable us to bring more people to church, a mission program that has taken people to Louisiana and Guatemala this year to minister in places of tremendous need...it's endless, and it's only a beginning. It's only a beginning. We have been moving from agony to ecstasy.

I don't know about you, but I am really so proud to be part of the ministry and mission of First United Methodist Church here in Fort Collins. Are you excited too? You know what, I have prayed for that. First time there's ever been applause in the middle of a sermon. We know agony in our lives, and sometimes that agony comes because, like Paul, we say, "Wretched one that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" But then the ecstasy comes, when with Paul we say, "But in the midst of that, thanks be to God who gives us victory through our lord and savior Jesus Christ." When my late wife and I moved to Fort Collins a number of years ago, we joined the Newcomers' Club here in Fort Collins, and one of the things that the Newcomers' Club was very interested in doing was giving a lot of support to women's sports at CSU. So we went to a lot of women's basketball and volleyball games. I loved the sport. All of us newcomers sat in section O. My wife enjoyed the sport, but she enjoyed also the socializing. Being the timid person that I am, I would say to the people there in section O, "You know, when they're cheering, we sit here and just sit. We need to cheer. Now come on, the next time they do it, get up there, let's go – R-A-M-S. You know. And I said to them more than once, "You know what, there are so many of us senior citizens coming to these games, I think there should be a senior citizen cheerleader out there on the floor, and I'm willing to volunteer to be that one."

I was kidding, but not completely. But you know what? That's of little consequence. But what is of great consequence and what I'm really excited about, and have been all my life, is being a cheerleader for Jesus Christ. And what I am becoming increasingly excited about is being a cheerleader for the ministry of First United Methodist Church of Fort Collins, and sharing that ministry with all of you. The theme of our stewardship this year

is "Breaking Out of the Box." And do you know what? We're all people like a jack-in-the-box. Sometimes our lives are contained within the box, but there is always something in us that's saying, "There's more, there's more, there's more." Use your gifts. Risk it. Step out. And there's always the lord Jesus Christ saying, "I will be with you, even to the end of the age." Are we willing to break out of the box? The next few weeks, and our responses, will say. Amen