



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

COLORING RAINBOWS WITH BROKEN CRAYONS

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Christianity

Mark 12.38-44

*As Jesus was teaching them, he said, "Beware of those who like to display their piety and their wealth. They walk around in fancy clothes and expect to be greeted with respect in the marketplace. They like to have the best seats at banquets and public events. For the sake of appearance, they say prayers often where people can see them. Yet, they take advantage of those who have nothing, using the poor for their own gain. They will receive the greater condemnation.*

*Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."*

Genesis 9.12-17

*God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my rainbow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant with all living creatures.*

Hinduism

Rig Veda 1.125.5

*Those who give liberally go straight to the gods; on the high ridge of heaven they stand exalted.*

Islam

Qur'an 39.10

*Those who act kindly in this world will have kindness.*

From the time of Noah onward the rainbow has been a symbol of hope. Some search for the pot of gold at the **end** of the rainbow, some dream of going somewhere **over** the rainbow, some analyze its scientific properties, and some just enjoy its sheer beauty. Who can explain the universal appeal of seeing white light broken out into its colorful components when refracted by a prism?

One of my first memories of rainbows was as a kid with coloring crayons. We didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up, and when my parents splurged to buy a 64-color crayon box with the flip top, I was ecstatic. I wanted to make a rainbow using all of the colors of that box of sharpened crayons, so neatly arranged in rows of ascending elevation. As time went by, of course, the crayon tips dulled, the color-identifying papers got ripped off so you couldn't tell the difference between the burnt sienna and the ochre and half of them had gotten broken in their use. And yet, rainbows can still be made with broken, unidentifiable crayons, a lesson I didn't assimilate until I was much older.

Jesus juxtaposes two observations in the temple to heighten an awareness that is not unlike the image of a box of crayons. What appears as perfect on the outside is no better at creating rainbows than the broken crayons that were often overlooked because of the perception that they were in some way inferior for the task at hand. The showy people, Jesus comments to his disciples, that paint a rosy picture of life by giving lots of money and appearing perfectly pious, are ultimately betrayed by the crimes of hubris committed against the broken and less fortunate of the world. And the broken people, Jesus points out further, are often more of what the world should be like.

The widow in this story has little to offer by way of worldly good, but, though broken by the world's standards, she has much to commend her as a model of generosity. By comparison to the show-offs, she actually offers more because what she does give comes from her soul, from her heart, from the center of her brokenness. She colors her world with broken crayons, as it were, even though few, if any, actually see the whole picture.

As a widow, she had no means of income except what others gave to her. As a widow, she had no personal or social credibility because a woman in those days was viable only if she was married. So for this woman to give back to others out of the meager living she made as a beggar was an admirable thing. It is, Jesus says, what the kingdom of God is about. The world as God would have it comes from making the world a better place to live; giving out of our own brokenness; coloring rainbows with broken crayons.

Consider the broken, unlabeled crayon. Its color is the same, whether you can name it or not. It's color is just as intense. Its ability to contribute to the beauty of the rainbow is just as keen when it is half size as when it is brand new. Like the flame of a candle, it is just as effective if it is two inches long as if it were a foot long; the size of the candle doesn't enhance or diminish the size of the flame or the light it gives off. Brokenness doesn't mean deficient.

Notice in this story that Jesus doesn't revere or shame either category of people based on who they are but rather on what they do. It is an observation of attitude, actions and their comparative generosity toward others. It is not the rich person's wealth or the pious person's piety that Jesus condemns; it is the sham they display in being upright in appearance while taking advantage of people behind closed doors. It is ultimately the judgment that has been made of the police officer from Fox Lake, Illinois who appeared on the surface one way but behind the façade was a more sinister person who used his power for personal gain at the expense of those less powerful.

One never knows when out of a day that seems all discombobulated to us ends up being helpful to someone else. One never knows when an inconvenience that disturbs our schedule may be the very thing that will be helpful to one who has created the inconvenience. One never knows when our own disappointments may be by the grace of God a way of connecting with someone else. One never knows when our own wounds, our own emotional poverty, our own sense of bereavement may be a gift to someone else also wounded and grieving.

One never knows when the least of our efforts, like stocking shelves at the food pantry or putting together meals at Feed My Starving Children may have a most profound effect on someone we will never meet. We never know when a word spoken to a child today will echo in the life of his grandchild in a world yet unknown to us. We never know when the rainfall of our lives will be the prism that breaks open the rainbow of color for someone generations in the future. And often the good work we end up doing comes out of the center of our own weariness, out of hearts and lives broken by the loss of loved ones, out of days of disappointments and anger and depression. For we are part of the Kingdom of God where the opportunities to create rainbows is endless and doing so with broken lives is never outside the realm of possibility.

The widow's mite (m-i-t-e) became the widow's might (m-i-g-h-t), for in giving of herself in such a sacrificial manner, Jesus proclaims, she contributed to more than the temple. She contributed to the kingdom of hope that has no boundaries on this earth. And in his own unique way Jesus modeled for us what it meant to be broken for the sake of justice and peace as he was nailed to a cross in consequence of his undying and unconditional love for the down-and-out folks of his day.

The story is told of a rabbi who was rumored to be so holy that on the Sabbath afternoons he ascended into heaven to personally commune with God. The rumor grew from the observation that this rabbi seemed to disappear from sight each Sabbath, and was not seen until the next day. Several boys decided to secretly following the rabbi, and when he passed over the hill, out of sight of the village, they saw him go into the homes of the elderly, the sick and the poor. He cooked meals, cleaned homes and read scripture to the lonely. When the boys were later asked if the rabbi really ascended into heaven, the boys answered, "No. He went much higher."

In that same sentiment, Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love.

That box of 64 crayons speaks even further of the hope of broken crayons, for built into the side of the box was a sharpener that allowed us to renew and redeem broken crayons, giving them once again that fine tip that was helpful in drawing rainbows. In the hands of God, our brokenness is restored, redeemed, re-sharpened for good purpose as we seek to give our mite and our might to make the world a better place for all. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, how excellent is your name in all the earth. One age declares your goodness to another and your steadfast love is the mainstay of the restless heart.

We thank you for the mystery of our years, and the will to live; for the rewards of solitude and the pleasure of congenial company; for satisfactions that follow work well done, and the renewing power of leisure. We thank you for hard choices that help us discover who we are; for goodwill from unexpected sources that finds us in our seasons of depression; and for the faith we appropriate for those times when seeing is not believing and uncertainty veils our vision.

Bless with a holy power and presence those who do the thankless chores beneath the bright facade of our city or our business or our neighborhood; those whose patience and expertise in teaching provide an environment where our children learn and grow; those who rise early to print newspapers and supply the markets with fresh food and produce; those who clean our hallways and offices at night; those who give up nights and holidays to police our streets and staff our hospitals and retirement homes and to extinguish fires; those who wait on us at table and bus our dirty dishes and greet us with a smile even after a long day. Remind us of those whose work is indispensable to our well-being and who are often unnamed and unremembered and unseen because our eyes have not seen with our heart.

We live in a world broken by poverty, crime, greed, hubris and political upheaval. Give us courage to face these challenges with love and caring rather than violence or apathy. For the family of the young boy who was executed by those seeking revenge on his father, and the community devastated by the betrayal of a leader and officer they trusted with their lives, we pray. We cannot comprehend the scope of such senseless acts of violence, and we pray when we cannot even form the words we need to express our sorrow and our fear.

Give us courage today to continue to live by faith. May we learn to look beyond the superficial, to see beyond the surface of whatever is before us to catch a vision of your loveliness in every person, every event, each moment of each day, each sparrow or hawk that crosses our pathway, each unseen flower that is yet only a seed or an autumn leaf that falls to the ground in the ongoing cycle of life. Even as we enter into the winter season of dormancy, may it be a time of awakening to the unseen, for that which is seen is temporal, but that which is unseen is eternal. Give us a spirit of Thanksgiving as we celebrate the harvest of the earth and of our spirits, in the name of the Christ, Amen.

(Portions of this prayer were excerpted from Ernie Campbell's prayer in *Prayers from Riverside*)