

I'm a Chunk of Coal, but I'm Gonna Be a Diamond

Jeremiah 1:4-10

It was discovered January 26, 1906. Lying above ground. One of thousands of stones heaped into a great pile of slag, the refuse from the mining operations of a Premier Diamond Mining operation. As John Cullinan walked through the slag fields, looking at the mine's output, a dazzling glint – like a mirror used as a Morse-code signal - flashed in the hot South African sun.

Slowly, deliberately, Cullinan walked toward the twinkling gleam. Letting his mind tease him with the possibility of what might be creating that glint, he didn't really allow himself to consider the fantasy seriously.

Finally he stood over that earthbound star-shine. As if in a daze, Cullinan put his hand down and picked off the slag pile a stone the size of a softball. It weighed 1.37 pounds. In diamond-speak, 3,106 carats. John Cullinan had just found the world's largest diamond.

Although already brilliant enough to catch and turn back the sunlight, the diamond Cullinan picked off the slag pile was still a diamond-in-the-rough. It was the challenge of a lifetime for the undisputed world master diamond-cutter, Joseph Asscher of Amsterdam, to turn the enormous stone into dazzlingly beautiful jewels. Without a master's touch the hidden fire locked within the diamond would never be ignited to its fullest flare.

The old master studied the Cullinan diamond, lived with it, breathed it, loved it for more than a year. With each passing day Asscher learned to know the stone inside and out, better than he knew the lines of his own face. As the diamond community held its collective breath, he finally took up his tools to slice the stone.

The first whack of hammer to chisel broke Asscher's steel blade, but not the diamond. On his second attempt the great stone was cleanly cleaved – and Asscher himself collapsed in a dead faint.

Eventually Asscher was able to cut the Cullinan diamond-in-the-rough into nine major stones, and 96 smaller gems. The largest of the jewels, coming in at 530.20 carats, became known as the "Great Star of Africa" and was placed in the head of the scepter of King Edward VII. Together with seven other of the Cullinan stones, they are part of the British Crown Jewels on display in the Tower of London.

What still astounds jewelers today is how Asscher was able to accurately perceive the Cullinan's interior beauty – where to cut, how to maximize the size of the stones, where to start the faceting. On such an enormous rough stone, the interior was as mysterious and unknowable as the depths of the sea.

Using only a jeweler's lop and magnifying microscopes, Asscher was able to determine the secrets of its interior life while only looking from the outside.

In 1988 another huge diamond came to light from the same Premier Mine in South Africa. Dubbed the Centenary Diamond it weighed in at 599.10 carats in the rough. This time the master diamond cutter selected for the stone's transformation was Gabrielle Tolkowsky of Belgium.

"Gabi" had the advantage – or perhaps the handicap – of all our late twentieth-century advanced imagined technology to help him determine how and where to cut the Centenary. MRI's, electron microscopes, high resolution spectroscopy – all gave Tolkowsky insider

information of what had remained hidden from Joseph Asscher when he was preparing to cut the Cullinan.

Finally after three years of round the clock study Tolkowsky was ready to make that first agonizing cut. Utilizing all the information at his fingertips, Tolkowsky was able to cut off precisely the minimal amounts of stone necessary to maximize the brilliance and flawlessness of the Centenary Stone. Today it stands as the world's largest and most modern-cut flawless diamond.

But the Centenary stands alone – literally. It's a beautifully cut, flawless stone. But it's not a jewel. It sits on a velvet cushion, a gleaming, glistening, fire-flashing...paperweight. It's shape is kind of a chunky, pyramidal lump. It doesn't fit into any scepter or golden crown. It will never be worn or used as a sign of royalty, or love, or adornment, or ornament for anyone or anything. It simply sits in cold, quiet beauty, unadorned and unadored.

There's an old country and western song that says "I'm just a ol' chunk of coal...but I'm gonna be a diamond someday."

Paul writes in Philippians 2:15, "So that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe." Jesus said the kingdom of heaven was like "a pearl of great price" (Matthew 13: 45).

In other words, God has created each one of us to be a dazzling, one-of-a-kind, original gemstone. But like Jeremiah, there are some steps and stages we must go through before our beauty shines through.

In judging any gemstone, there are four C's that come into play. An expert gemologist judges every stone by these four Cs: Cut. Clarity. Carat. Color. All four need to come together to make a great gemstone. In today's text from Jeremiah, where we read the "call" of this prophet, we see the transformation of a small, unremarkable boy into a dynamic, authoritative voice of the Lord through these 4 Cs.

Let's look at each one and see how they might apply to our lives, our church, and our mission.

Cut - Every gem has to be cut into some kind of shape: pear, oval, triangle, square, trapezoid, etc. That's what happened to the Cullinan gem. But a stone that hasn't been cut and shaped remains just that – a stone. Which is the Centenary stone. Here's the question: are you willing to be cut? Have you been willing to be cut?

Years ago this phrase made the rounds: "No pain, no gain." It's a profound truth. The cuts of life – the pains, the failures, the sufferings – are all instruments that can shape us into the person God intends us to be. Or they can crush us to smithereens.

It all depends on whether we allow the master cutter of the universe to transform those cuts and curses into blessings and strengths. There's no person more sick, more inhuman, more pathetic, more to be pitied, more mentally ill, than the person who refuses to get cut. The person who refuses to get hurt is the person who refuses to live.

It's one of the chief mysteries of life: where you're cut the most is where your beauty shines strongest. Jeremiah's tongue was cut. But Jeremiah's tongue became God's greatest instrument of healing God's people. Proverbs 20:15 teaches us that "Gold there is, and rubies in abundance, but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel."

God wants to do in and through you what God did to Jeremiah: put his hand on you and place within it the resources that would save the people of this world.

Carat - How significant is the stone's size? One of the key tests of an expert gemologist is to distinguish between size and significance. What carat is your mission? How significant are your ambitions for God and the gospel?

At one point Paul attacks a church for "making its ambition to have no ambition." It's always the right time for any church to dream God-sized dreams and have God-sized visions. Many of our hopes and dreams are so small and puny and pint-sized they hardly register on any scale of significance. They're "like a gold ring in a pig's snout" (Proverbs 11:22). A one carat diamond can be more significant than a larger five carat diamond. What matters is where it's placed.

Jeremiah's calling of the people of Israel to significance, and his vision of a new Jerusalem out of the ashes of the old, was not a popular one, but it was a necessary one. A significant one.

Clarity - Can light bend through the facets without distortion? Are there impurities or interior fractures that are blocking the transmission of light?

There's a difference between a stone and a jewel. A stone blocks light, a jewel transmits it, shapes it, and colors it. But the jewel is not the source of the light. And knowing that the source of the light lies elsewhere makes all the difference.

Jeremiah was clear enough for the light to shine through him and wise enough to know that he was not the light. Are you?

Color - Every stone has its own unique color. One color is not better than another, just different. Some people prefer yellow diamonds, other blue diamonds, others black and others white diamonds. The challenge is to be the color you were created to be. And then, to transmit the color you are to those around you.

Jeremiah had within him his true color even before the divine finger touched his lips. Jeremiah's true color was imbedded in him while he was in the womb. As integral as any part of the human genome - a kind of blueprint for a human soul - these glimmers and glistenings live within each one of us, waiting for the hand of God to light us up with fiery splendor.

Conclusion - A jeweler was showing a number of beautiful gems to a perspective buyer. Among the flashing diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, there lay one dull, flat stone. "What's that one doing there?" the customer asked, "It doesn't have any brilliance or beauty at all."

The jeweler lifted the stone from its tray and closed his fist around it tightly. When he opened his fist it was as though he held a rainbow in the palm of his hand. Fire-flashes of green, gold, pink, lavender, and blue, all lit up the stone's interior.

"This is an opal," the jeweler explained. "It's what we call a sympathetic jewel. It need only to be gripped by a human hand to bring out all the color, depth, and beauty trapped within it."

Are you a Centenary Stone or an opal? Are you merely a glassy paperweight or a sympathetic jewel? I believe that God's favorite gemstones are the sympathetic jewels – those that only dazzle and radiate their colors when gripped by another.

Where the warmth and life of hand and heart sets it on fire. Where the stronger, more powerful the grip, the more depth and color and complexity is the display.

Will you allow your life to be gripped by the hand of God this morning? It's the only way the four Cs – Cut, Carat, Clarity, and Color – will ever come together and create the jewel you were created to be and are today.