

Emptied Out
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This morning our text comes from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. It's primarily a letter about joy. Paul and the church at Philippi had a long and happy relationship.

Paul writes from prison, where his deep faith helps him triumph over his bleak circumstances and allows him to praise God and give thanks.

Scholars think the reasons Paul writes this letter is to let the Philippians know that he was okay, to thank the people for their financial help, to address a quarrel between some church members and to make an introduction to a messenger.

This reading will be very familiar to many of you. It contains what is commonly referred to as The Christ Hymn, which is incredibly poetic and moving. Beautiful and difficult for us to fully comprehend.

It helps to remember that Paul, despite his long sentences, deep theological images, is a practical guy. His letters were going to churches that were dealing with earthly, practical matters. For Paul, theology and action go hand in hand. He understands that the way we think about God and where and how God moves directly relates to our behavior and how we act and of course, to how churches operate.

Aside: As the confirmands join the church, they write faith and action statements. We prompt them to write, "I believe...and therefore I will..."

Listen now to how God is speaking to you today through these words.
(Philippians 2: 1-13)

1If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

3Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

*5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

*12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my
presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with
fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will
and to work for God's good pleasure.*

AMEN

Muhammed Ali was getting ready to take off on a plane one day. The flight attendant saw that his seat belt wasn't buckled and reminded him to do so.

Ali responded, "Superman doesn't need a seatbelt." To which the flight attendant replied, "Superman doesn't need an airplane."

Paul addresses the issue of humility.

Humility is not thinking too much or too little of yourself. And it is in short supply today as it has been throughout history. Feelings of superiority or inferiority have no place in a church.

Living in a world that judges a person's value based on address, pedigree, education, or on what a person can produce, a world that is stratified by class and wealth, causes some to feel that life is a perpetual competition. You know all the ways this is lived out – the media offers us superficial and unattainable standards of beauty, pressure is put on parents to place their kids in the highest performing schools, test scores and college entrance exams raise anxiety in our youth, downsizing businesses creates work places filled with back-stabbing, and our politicians denigrate and dismiss one another when they do not agree.

The church is not to reflect the values of the world. We are the body of Christ, and each person is valued. We are all given gifts to glorify God and build up the body.

Paul's words then and now stand as a counter-cultural corrective. He admonishes followers of Jesus to make it a habit to put others first. To work for the good of all, not just ourselves. Welcome someone to the table whose politics we don't understand. To put the needs of the person we may like least ahead of ourselves.

There can be no unity in the body of Christ if we look down on people and judge them as inferior.

Nor can there be unity if we truly feel worthless or feel shame or that everyone is better than we are. This is no invitation to suffer abuse.

We are all part of the intricate web of creation, designed and sustained by God. As the children so poignantly pointed out during Messy Church – you are loved, and so are they, except the truth is that there is no us and them – it's all us.

Unity is not thinking all alike, or loving the same worship style or having the same ideas about programming. It's about sharing the same attitude, the same mind. The mind of Christ.

Insofar as possible, we are to have the attitude of the one we serve. To view the world the way Christ does. Without borders or boundaries, without human hierarchy or excessive pride. Renewed and made alive over and over again.

To have the mind of Christ is to know, deep down, that we are forgiven, renewed – we are whole. That our humanness is beloved. The church, then, is a place of grace, where we can share our lives honestly, and be Christ's hands in the world.

Paul's poetry gets at the heart of God's nature. God poured God's very self into the form of Jesus, who could have been king of the universe with all the bragging rights, a person of power, but instead, he humbled himself. He emptied himself for others and served selflessly. And God raised him up.

I was pleased to read a commentary about this text this week that pointed out that Paul's description of Jesus' emptying out, the ultimate giving of himself for others is not to be read as an ideal or doctrine separate from our lived experience. Because that is how I once read would have read this scripture.

Because it is Mother's Day, I will confess to you that when I was a young mother hungry for and passionate about discipleship I felt that I simply couldn't do enough. I couldn't serve enough – there wasn't enough of me to go around. There were times when I felt inadequate, in and out of church. Scriptures like these didn't help.

I longed to know that I was loved, that what I was enough – for my husband, my kids, my church and community. Enough for God.

I'm in a different space now, in terms of age and experience. And I approached the concept of Christ's emptying differently as I re-read the scripture this week. I was glad when I discovered this by Jan Richardson, a pastor, author and artist who I greatly admire:

She writes -- Life will empty us out, whether we will it or not. Yet Paul reminds us that we belong to the Christ who freely chose to empty himself: who gave himself completely in a way that, paradoxically, did not diminish him but helped to reveal the fullness of who he was, and is. Encompassed by the Christ who enfolds our emptiness in his own, we become free to choose how we will respond to the emptying. In the emptying that naturally happens in life, as well as in the emptying Christ asks us to seek out and embrace, how will we allow the hollowing to open our hearts to the world we are called to serve in joy and in love?

So many people these days are exhausted, frustrated, fearful and anxious.

To be human is to have our hearts get broken, and we grieve in so many ways – when someone we love dies, or our life changes because of a scary diagnosis, job loss, divorce, or when a child is in trouble. We are hollowed out when we read of terrorist attacks, violence in schools, war in Syria, the latest Washington

shenanigans, and volcanoes, earthquakes and floods that destroy lives and property.

In the midst of our brokenness, in our illness, our grief - even struggling with getting it all done, God is present with us, holding us in love and grace. Reminding us that we are enough. Accepting that truth allows us to be a people of compassion, unified to share the gospel.

I recently had an experience of this in a powerful way.

As many of you know, my father died on April 18th after a long, full life. He was well loved and he loved well. Though geographically distant, I was close with my father. And I was the luckiest kid in the world, blessed to have a dad who loved to learn, to write poetry and music, to converse and whose natural exuberance and love buoyed me my entire life. His death is painful. There will always be an empty place inside of me where my dad fits. Doesn't matter that dad was 88 and I am more than grown.

During these weeks, while I was feeling lost, sad and foggy-minded, you surrounded me and my family with your love and your prayers, your texts, your hugs, calls, emails. Your compassion is born from your experience of loss and you poured out your care. You didn't try to cheer me up, or somehow make it better or offer advice. (No one ever uttered those dreaded words...at least.) Instead You simply and kindly bore witness to my pain and were present on the journey. It was, and is, a gift. In the midst of difficulty, I could take a breath.

Empathy flows when we connect to the vulnerability in ourselves and the world. Our brokenness, our woundedness does not have to define us, but is the light through which God's love shines. In that light, we touch the fullness of our lives. As we are poured out honestly, humbly, imperfectly, space for beauty and joy is created. We can serve with humility and tenderness.

God chose to enter this broken world, not as a super hero, but as a vulnerable human being – sharing in our suffering, showing us the essence of a God who is with us.

God continues to be at work within us, pouring love into the hurting places of our souls. So let us have patience with one another, and with ourselves, while we seek to have the mind of Christ, choosing the way of humility and love. AMEN

