

“Empty”

Psalm 3; Philippians 2:1-12

January 30, 2022

Now I'm a bit reluctant to start out with the story I'm going to. Let me preface it by simply saying that I am not a gambler and I think there are a whole lot of reasons, both Biblical and otherwise, why it's not a great idea. That being said, one day, a bunch of us decided that what we needed was a poker night. But, we all agreed, gambling wasn't a great idea so it was going to be a penny-ante poker night. That's right, we all showed up with about \$2 in pennies to start out with. Then, we set down to a serious game of Texas Hold 'Em. It all started out fairly well. The first couple of hands went okay. I don't recollect winning but since the sum total of the win would've been about .40 cents, I don't know that I would. That's when one player figured something out. When you're playing with pennies and the most you were ever going to lose was \$2, going all in is a fairly risk-free proposition. I mean, if I think I have a good hand, what's to stop me from emptying out my kitty and gambling it all? Well, as it would turn out, not so much. After that, the game got pretty dull, fairly fast. Any time someone would get a good hand, they'd go all in. We ended up stopping fairly quickly after that. The thing that makes going all-in so hair raising is, of course, that the outcome might not entirely turn out the way you think it would. There might be, in fact, a loss ahead instead of a win. In that case, going all in, emptying out what you've got to take a chance on what will be is a much, much more hair-raising endeavor.

Today's reading from the New Testament from Philippians is, without question, one of the most cited by me of all the Scriptures. No kidding, if you were to go back and do like a meta-analysis of my sermons, I'm fairly certain you would find portions of this particular reading in at least 40 percent of the sermons I preach. I think that this is such foundational theology on Jesus that every Christian, when asked about Jesus, ought to be literally or metaphorically turning the pages of their Bible to this very passage.

I think this passage so foundational about Jesus and thusly about ourselves because to talks of a divine act of will that seems, well, ODD to us. What do I mean? Simply put, Jesus doesn't use the power of God to amass more, he uses it to make a choice to empty himself. To let go of the privileges of divinity. He empties HIMSELF instead of filling Himself. When you and I get power, we typically use it to ensure our own comfort. Take, for example, first class airline tickets. As you make more and more money, you have the power, for example, to section yourself off from the hoi-polloi. For vast sums of money, you can secure your own private sleeping lounge on longer flight. You're taking a portion of your power (money) to ensure removal from some of the more mundane hassles of being cramped and crowded together with hundreds of complete strangers.

But the point of this morning, New Testament passage is that Jesus didn't do that. He, through his emptying, did the opposite. Paul tells us about this emptying in a joyful context. Paul's letter to the Church at Philippi is one of his most irenic, peaceful and joyful in our entire canon. Scholars think that there's a reason for this, interestingly. First of all, the church seems to be doing well. Unlike other letters, Paul isn't so primarily concerned with putting out fires from where the congregation has gone astray. Philippians is no First Corinthians or Galatians where the churches Paul has planted have taken some seriously wrong turns. No, Philippians is much more like an update letter written to an old friend. And what do you most want to do with old friends? Reminisce and celebrate and that's exactly what Paul does for the bulk of the letter. Here, in chapter two, he writes what is known as a kenotic hymn.

Let me explain that that means. Kenosis is the Greek word for the act of emptying. Here in Philippians 2, what we see is Jesus willfully detaching from the privileges of divinity. He gives us freedom from the passing of time or even having just one physical location. HE forgoes the ability to be free of a human body. It would be like going from the penthouse suite at the Waldorf Astoria to being homeless in a snowstorm. That's the kind of emptying of privilege that Jesus undertakes.

Have you ever seen something like that? I have, on a smaller scale, admittedly. When I was at Mount Holly, we took a mission trip every year to work in West Virginia weather-proofing and rehabbing houses for people. While we worked, there were always local kids that would swarm around us, curious as to what we were doing. One man, Paul, noted that those kids didn't seem to have much to do. A man of humble means, Paul came back to Mount Holly and began collecting junked bikes at the local dump. Then, over the course of that year, he bought parts where they needed and restored those bikes to rideable. By the time we were set to go back, Paul

had assembled 7 bikes that he was going to give to those kids. He talked about it just about every time we talked, more as we got closer to the trip date. Just as we were heading up, one of our faithful kitchen crew got injured such that she wasn't going to be able to cook. She was heartbroken, she looked forward to going and being a part of helping other people. Paul told her, no problem, she could give the kids the bikes, HE would work in the kitchen. Look, this man put a ton of work into those bikes, getting to see the kids' faces light up HAD to be what he was expecting. But, given a reason, Paul found it simple to give up that privilege to someone else.

Paul's action is a nice analogy to help us understand exactly what Jesus Christ did for us and for our salvation. You see, this emptying of Jesus was a necessity for us. At the beginning of chapter two in Ephesians, the Apostle Paul tells us precisely why Jesus emptied himself – **Ephesians 2:1-3** – *“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”* **Romans 5:12** – *“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned....”* The point is that we were dead, spiritually and headed towards eternal death YET WE WERE GOD'S BELOVED.

In the beginning, God created Heaven and earth. And then, as the centerpiece of all creation, God made you and I. He breathed his breath of life into our lungs, giving us both shape and life. We were created in His image, according to Genesis, and were appointed particular tasks we were to perform. We were to be stewards over all creation, populating this world and filling with the divine image of God. But we chose to stray. And even though it was Adam and Eve and not you and me, the truth is this – we would've done the same exact thing. We like to think we wouldn't but we would. There's even a name for the delusion. It's called, “The Hindsight Effect” and it's a well-documented psychological phenomenon. We have the tendency to ALWAYS believe that, given the same data, we'd make the right choice when other people made the wrong one. But it's all done from the cool detachment of observation. When you actually are given the same choices, guess what, you make the same choices even though you thought you wouldn't. It's like someone watching a major league fastball, sure they could hit it but, when they get to the plate, they get blown away just like everyone else.

Given that tree, we'd be eating of its fruit just like Adam and Eve did. And that's sin, folks, and God cannot abide sin. **Romans 5:12** – *“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”*

Sin and death go hand in hand. That we chose to sin limits our lives in a way that leads inexorably to death. This is a death that comes as we are removed from God will and ways. **Habakkuk 1:13a** – *“You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong.”* God cannot be in the presence of sin yet God loves us. That's why Jesus had to empty Himself. It was a choice He himself made and it was one borne of His love for us. Paul talks about it succinctly in Romans 5 – **Romans 5:7-8** – *“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

What Paul wants us to see in Philippians is that doing so came at a cost. The cost of our salvation isn't JUST the cross. It is ALSO the incarnation. Jesus emptied Himself so that we could be reconciled back to God the Father eternally. Jesus laid down a measure of His divinity, took on flesh and became human.

With the Super Bowl around the corner, I began to think of what this kind of self-emptying would look like in our lives in a couple of weekends from now. Just imagine, the day of the big game, instead of posting yourself on your couch with as many nachos and chicken wings you can eat, you instead chose to be a servant. Cooking and cleaning and doing dishes, never even taking a second to watch even a down of the game? Then, while everyone else cheered and hollered, it's going to be a great game, let's say, you were in the back, mopping the floors as the game came to an exciting, all-time finish.

Have you ever washed dishes, and I mean, at a restaurant? On a busy night, you walk out of there wet. Both from the water used to wash the dishes and your own sweat the other portion of it. You're tired and grimy and likely reek of cleaning solution and stale food. That's the kind of empty we're talking about. And that's the kind of empty Jesus went for us in order to save us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.