

## Good Friday 2015 Sermon

(the Scripture reading is John 18:1-19:42)

Last Sunday, at the beginning of Holy Week, we read a passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5-11) -- that wonderful hymn which begins:

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

...

The passage is read at the beginning of Holy Week **every** year; and appropriately so, for I believe it holds the key to interpreting not only the events of Holy Week, but of Jesus' whole life. Even more specifically, I think the interpretive key is to be found in those two words, "emptied himself". The Greek word is *kenosis* – emptying. And I would suggest, tonight, that it is in the sense of "emptying" that we can truly say that Jesus *sacrificed* himself. His sacrifice was not a **price** he paid in exchange for our forgiveness, as we saw last night; but simply, and more fundamentally, it was his *emptying* himself.

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"Though he was in the form of God..." Paul's hymn begins with the pre-existent, eternal Christ: God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Word of God, as St. John calls him. In Jesus' conception and birth, that eternal Word is poured out into humanity; the Word becomes flesh (John 1:14). The Word did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, Paul says; rather, he let it go, and emptied himself into human flesh. Nine months in the womb of his mother, like each one of us; pushed out of the womb into this earthly existence, like each one of us. The Eternal Christ, emptied into humanity, born in human likeness.

And not only was he "born in human likeness", according to Paul; he took the form of a *slave* – the very **lowest** state of being human – wrapping a slave's towel around him to wash his disciples' feet, as we experienced last night. Healing, teaching, feeding in town after town, he poured out his life. Emptying, and then emptying some more, until all he had left to empty was his very life. "Having

loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end,” as St. John wrote in last night’s Gospel. (John 13:1-17)

And so we come to *this* day where we contemplate Jesus’ *final* emptying.

Writing about this passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, Cynthia Bourgeault notes that, “in this beautiful hymn, Paul recognizes that Jesus had only one ‘operational mode.’ Everything he did, he did by self-emptying... In whatever life circumstance, Jesus always responded with the same motion of self-emptying.” (*The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Kindle Version, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2008 p. 64)

In our adult class several years ago we watched the Academy Award-winning foreign film “Babette’s Feast,” in which the woman Babette is a Christ figure, pouring herself out completely in sacrificial love. Cynthia Bourgeault summarizes the plot. She writes:

“Babette had, until recently, been one of the most celebrated chefs in Paris, but during the political riots of 1871 she loses everything—restaurant, livelihood, and family. She flees for her life to rural Denmark and is taken in by two aging sisters who have given their lives to religious work, trying to hold together the spiritual community that their father founded. When Babette arrives, the remaining believers have grown old and weary, lost in petty bickering. Babette tries as best she can to lift their spirits, but nothing seems to be turning the situation around. Out of the blue a letter arrives informing Babette that she has won three million francs in a lottery back in Paris, and then and there she decides to treat these Danish peasants to a proper French dinner. She imports all the necessary ingredients: not only exotic gourmet delicacies for the seven-course meal itself (each with its appropriate wines, champagnes, and liqueurs) but the china dinnerware, silver cutlery, damask table cloths, and crystal glassware. The film zeroes in on the banquet table as the astonished Danish peasants are suddenly faced with this extravagant abundance. At first they are frightened and suspicious, but little by little the mood mellows as they slowly relax into gratitude and forgiveness. The last scene of that banquet night has them all stumbling, a bit drunk but very happy, out into the village square, where they form a circle around the fountain (a vivid image in its own right) and begin to sing and dance together. After all these years they have finally touched the wellspring, and their hearts are overflowing. Then someone says to Babette, ‘Well, I guess you’ll be leaving us soon, won’t you, now that you’re a rich woman?’ She says, ‘Rich? I’m not rich. I spent every penny I had on that banquet, three million francs.’” (*ibid.*, p. 67)

Anyone who has ever attempted to cook a Thanksgiving dinner for a whole family all by herself knows how exhausting it can be. Multiply that exhaustion by a power of 10, and you know how fully Babette poured herself out in this extravagantly generous meal – a Eucharistic meal, for sure. In one of the last

scenes of the film, the camera focuses on the exhausted Babette, clothed in her servant's clothes and sitting, collapsed, in the dark kitchen storeroom. What light there is, coming from an open door or window, casts Babette's shadow against the wall, forming the rough but recognizable shape of a cross. Cynthia Bourgeault says that in completely emptying herself for these broken, dispirited people, Babette "mirrors to them what God is like, what love is like, what true humanness is like. And she does it precisely by throwing away her entire escape route in a single act of extravagant abundance, extravagant beyond the bounds of earth (and therefore invoking the presence of heaven)." (*ibid.*, p. 68) *That* is the path of self-emptying, *kenosis*. Babette, indeed, "has the same mind in [her] that was in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 2:5) Christ lives in her, and she lives in Christ – which is what this day is calling **us** to do. For Christ does not die so that **we** don't *have* to; he doesn't let us off the hook that easy. Rather, his death **reveals** the self-emptying nature of God, and invites us to enter into that outpouring flow.

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright comments on St. Paul's hymn: "[Christ's] decision to become human," Bishop Wright notes, "and to go all the way along the road ... yes, all the way to the cross—this decision was not a decision to *stop* being divine. It was a decision about *what it really meant to be divine*.<sup>1</sup> ...As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love. ...

"Yes, says Paul; and **that's** 'the mind of Christ' ..."<sup>1</sup>

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...*

Jesus does not die on the cross to "even the score" of our debt with God. That is a marketplace mindset, as we saw last night, and it is *foreign* to the mind of Christ. Rather, I would suggest that we see Jesus' sacrifice on the cross from St. Paul's perspective, described in his hymn – see in Jesus' death on the cross the final act in a *continuum* of self-emptying which began when the Son of God, not counting equality with God something to be grasped, emptied himself into human form. That self-emptying continued throughout Jesus' ministry. Do you remember the incident where Jesus is in a crowd of people and a woman who had been suffering from bleeding for 12 years touches his robe? In a small detail, seemingly so unimportant that Matthew and Luke don't even mention it, Mark says that when the woman touched his robe, Jesus was "immediately aware that power had gone out from him"; *The Message* translation reads that Jesus "felt energy discharging from him". (Mark 25:5-30) Is this not an example of Jesus *emptying* himself into another person, pouring himself out for the sake of others, just as Babette did in her feast? And I have to believe that if "energy was discharged from" Jesus in **this** healing, certainly energy was discharged from him in **every one** of his

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (p. 102). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

healings! He was forever pouring energy into others, emptying his life-blood into others; and the cross is the final, complete emptying. “It is finished,” Jesus says in his last words in today’s Gospel. Was his death, in this sense of emptying himself, a sacrifice? Absolutely! But so was his incarnation, when he emptied himself into human form. His incarnation, temptation, healings, teachings, suffering and death were **all** sacrifice, in the root meaning of the word, *sacer facere*, “to make holy,” to fill with divine life.

And so, what **is** the meaning of the cross for us? Obviously, I do not pretend to have THE answer to that question – if there even **is** a definitive answer (which I strongly doubt). But I can suggest two things.

First, the cross *reveals* to us in the most powerful way possible the true nature of God. As Biblical scholar N.T. Wright said, “As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.”<sup>1</sup> Simply *knowing* that this **is** the nature of God can make all the difference in how we approach life and interact with the world. Albert Einstein once said, “I think the most important question facing humanity is, ‘Is the universe a friendly place?’” The cross of Jesus answers Einstein’s question with a resounding “Yes!” The universe was created in, is sustained by, and is moving toward, self-giving, *forgiving* love; therefore, we can risk being open to all of it. Our mistakes do not condemn us. We need not fear reality, for the God revealed by the crucified Jesus is a God of self-emptying love.

Secondly, in emptying himself completely in death, Jesus sets in motion a mysterious and infinitely powerful process, which was embedded in the DNA of the universe at its creation. That process is summarized in four words: life comes from death. We see it all around us: We have life on this earth because the Sun is constantly burning itself out, constantly dying. The food we eat was once a living, breathing plant or animal that died in order that we might live. Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus (or the narrator of the Gospel) says that Jesus’ “**hour** has not yet come.” (John 2:4; 7:6, 8; 7:30, 8:20) Then, shortly after his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus says: “The hour *has* come... Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” It is with that image that Jesus enters Holy Week, and that image of a grain of wheat dying in order to bring more life interprets all that is to come.” (John 12:23-24. See also John 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:21; 17:1)) “Those who would save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will save it.” It is a saying that Jesus repeats many times throughout the Gospels. *The Message* translation has Jesus say, “anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.” (John 12:25)

If you let your life go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.

Last night we recalled O. Henry's story of James and Della, who are madly in love with each other, but have no money to buy each other Christmas presents. Secretly, James pawns his grandfather's gold watch to buy Della silver combs for her beautiful, long hair; secretly, Della cuts her hair and sells it to buy James a watch chain. In a marketplace economy, it is all a tragic waste, for both the watch chain and the combs are now useless; but in the kingdom of God, where death gives rise to life, the useless gifts of Della and James become the divine gifts of the magi – far *more* meaningful, far more powerful than any watch chain or silver combs. The gift of self-emptying for the sake of another: it is that grain of wheat that has died, and in so doing, a force of life is released that bears fruit many times over.

In letting go our tight grasp on life, we find greater life. The eternal Christ did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, even unto death on a cross. And in doing so, the Son of God sets in motion that mysterious power of life issuing forth from death in such a powerful way that he draws us into the flow, if we will but let go.

What *is* that power of life-from-death which is found in the seed that dies, which is built into the DNA of the universe? It is almost impossible to explain, for it comes from a divine dimension so foreign to our dualistic world that it has no ready metaphor. It is what Dr. Bourgeault, in all her articulate brilliance, can only call “divine alchemy”. (*ibid.* pp. 72, 74) It is what Aslan the Lion in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* calls “a deeper magic which goes back before the dawn of time,” which not even the evil witch knows anything about. When that deeper magic is engaged, Aslan explains, a mysterious power is released which makes “Death itself start working backwards.” (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, copyright 1950, C.S. Lewis Pte. Ltd.)

Makes Death itself start working backwards.

Whatever that “deeper magic” is, I am convinced that it emanates from a deep and profound *kenosis*, genuine self-emptying; for this is the very nature and power of God. Jesus' cross reveals this deep magic most clearly. In “emptying himself... even unto death on a cross,” Jesus enters fully into the mystery of dying-to-live, revealing to us the Way that we, too, must follow. And in that divine alchemy of death turning to life, Jesus becomes the enzyme, the catalyst enabling the alchemy, the deeper magic, to do its work in us.