

“Emptying and Filling”

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If 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.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, 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; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:1-13)

Back in 2010, our family took our first visit to the Great Wolf Lodge in Williamsburg, Virginia. Kate was not yet four; Molly was 7, so they were big enough to enjoy the indoor water park to the fullest. Interestingly, one of my clearest memories from that visit isn't the wave pool or the tornado water slide, but of the big bucket way up high on the central structure. A water pipe ran continuously into the bucket, and it was weighted so that, when the water inside reached a certain height, a bell would start ringing, and the bucket would slowly begin to tip over until it finally spilled 1,000 gallons of water down onto the people below, all of whom were gleefully waiting for this baptism from above. Gravity would then swing the bucket back into resting position, and the filling would begin again. And that happened all day, every day... every five minutes... filling and emptying... filling and emptying.

This is the spiritual image I would like us to explore today, because it is the same spiritual image that Paul employs in this passage from Philippians. Most scholars believe that this passage is not original to Paul – that it is a fragment of a more ancient Christian hymn or poem that Paul purposely incorporates into his message to Philippi. If true, this rhetorical choice underscores the importance that Paul gives to the pattern of Christ's life – a pattern marked by emptying and filling.

The first movement in the hymn is the emptying. Even though he “*was in the form of God,*” Jesus did not use his glorified divine status as an entitlement or a power card to play. Instead of building himself up, Christ did the opposite. He “emptied himself” completely, even to the point of an agonizing and humiliating death on a cross. The Greek verb used here is κενόω (kenoó), which means “to empty,” or to pour out completely. It is the root of a theological term used to reference the sacrificial ethic of Christ: kenosis. Paul urges Christians to practice the same ethic – to imitate the life of Christ by turning away from



“selfish ambition” and “conceit,” and choosing instead to adopt a Christlike humility -- regarding others as better than ourselves, and looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. While most people in that day were adopting the Roman practices of seeking honor, pursuing upward mobility, and striving for personal gain, those who follow Christ were to empty themselves of such selfish interests, opting instead a life of relinquishment and the honoring of others.¹

That is the essence of kenosis, and for Paul, it was not just one of many Christian attributes. It was the decisive and most important attribute. A Christian life is not a turf war or a ladder of influence to be climbed. It is a life marked by selfless love, humility, and a willingness to empty ourselves of selfish interest and to pour ourselves out in lives of service and devotion to others.²

That, however, is not the end of the hymn. As I hope we all know, the story of Christ does not end in a dark and empty valley of death and denial. Ironically, it is the act of emptying himself in obedience and love that makes room for God to fill Jesus beyond all measure. Because of his sacrifice, as a result of his self-emptying, God “highly exalted him.” Again, the Greek word pops off the page to illustrate Paul’s point. The verb for “to exalt beyond measure” is *hyperupsosen* (ὑπερύψωσεν).³ Christ did not just get a lift up... he got a “hyper-up” ... a mega-power-boost that pulled him up to the greatest heights of heaven, giving “*him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” By emptying himself, Jesus was filled beyond measure. By putting himself last, he became first.

Paul asserts that this is the pattern of the Christian life. Those who would be first must be the servant of all. Those who want to save their life must lose it first. By emptying ourselves of selfish goals, we create room for the enduring blessings of God to be poured into us until our cup overflows. Emptying and filling... emptying and filling.

This contrasts sharply with the kind of living that often leaves us empty. I once heard the pastor and author Tony Campolo tell a story about a memorable Christmas in his childhood. That year, the thing he wanted more than anything was a Lionel electric train. He begged his parents, but they told him he had to ask Santa Claus. So, one Saturday in December he went with his mother to Gimbel’s Department Store – where he knew Santa would be. He was old enough to have figured out the secret of the red-flannelled saint – that all of the bell-ringing red coats and strip mall elves were Santa’s helpers, but the real one was at Gimbel’s.

When he got to the end of the line he jumped up with gusto and shouted loud enough for most of the store to hear, “I want electric trains!”

When Christmas morning finally arrived, little Tony ran downstairs. He grabbed the first box he saw and ripped into it with joyful expectation. And it was... underwear. He moved to the next one, and the next one, and each time, no train. His

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26/commentary-on-philippians-21-13-6>

² <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/kingdom-and-kenosis-the-mind-of-christ-in-pauls-ethics/>

³ <https://biblehub.com/greek/5251.htm>

hopes began to grow dimmer and dimmer, until he caught sight of a large box tucked off to the side behind the Christmas tree. He could see the large tag, “For Tony.” He tore back the paper, lifted the lid, and there they were – a brand new set of Lionel trains. He picked up the engine and hugged it like a teddy bear. “I loved everybody,” he said. “My joy knew no bounds. I loved my mother. I loved my father... I loved my sisters. I loved my *sisters!*”

He said the next three hours were spent in ecstasy, but then something happened. The trains didn’t break. It was something worse. The trains had become... old. They went around the track in a circle, but the magic was already wearing off. The joy was gone, and he felt strangely empty.⁴

When our lives are not oriented to the things of God, when we concentrate on the things that the world tells us are so important, we can end up spending our time and energy doing things that will ultimately leave us empty. But when we spend our time and energy on the things that please God, we find that as we pour ourselves into that kind of life, that we are not left empty. On the contrary we find ourselves strangely filled and fulfilled with blessings that we could not have anticipated.

My mom has always had a green thumb, and our yard was always beautiful in every season. When I was little, I remember that one of my favorite things was to go behind her as she planted with a big metal watering can. When it was full, it was kind of hard for me to lift, but I loved the sensation of pouring the water out onto the little plants that had been tucked gently into the soil, and now needed a deep drink of water. The tip of the spout had just the right amount of holes so that the water would not be dumped too abruptly on the delicate plants, but instead be dissipated into a perfect shower of life-giving rivulets that was not too hard, not too soft, but just right.

This is the promise of God for those who turn away from selfish pursuits and turn toward the light of heaven – the promise of Isaiah 44:3, where the Lord vows to *“pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.”*

It is also the pattern of the sacrament we are about to share – a meal that will be shared by millions of Christians around the world. That meal was instituted by Christ on the very night when he would begin to empty himself out in love for the world. Taking a loaf of bread, he blessed it and broke it and said, “This is my body given for you.” And then he took a cup, and giving to them, said, *“Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”*⁵

And this is the pattern of the Christian life... pouring out to make way for God’s blessings... emptying and being filled... emptying and being filled.

One of my most steadfast and supportive friends in ministry is Craig Siler... a faithful member of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Greensboro. One of his true spiritual gifts is to be an encourager – one who seeks to support those who are trying to follow Christ. That gift is encapsulated in the phrase he always uses to close a letter or an email. It came

⁴ Tony Campolo, “The Ecstasy of Spirituality on Christmas,” <https://www.redletterchristians.org/the-ecstasy-of-spirituality-on-christmas/>

⁵ Matthew 26:26-28.

out of his training to be a Stephen Minister – someone who devotes themselves to supporting people who are grieving or in crisis and need a listening ear and a caring heart to lean on. While he was going through that training, his devotions carried him to the third chapter of Ephesians, and prayer of Paul for the Christians in that place: *“I pray that, according to the riches of [Christ’s] glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

Craig felt a strange power in that final phrase – that we would be able to see the awesome scope of God’s love, and that might *“be filled with all the fullness of God.”* After a week of turning this idea over in his spirit, he landed upon the words that would become the consistent closing to every correspondence with his brothers and sisters in faith: ***“Keep giving and living the full measure.”***

It is a reminder that the pattern of this ancient Christian hymn is not only the pattern of Christ’s life, but the pattern of every Christian life -- emptying ourselves so that we might be filled... pouring ourselves out in love so that God’s love may be poured back into us... emptying and filling... emptying and filling.

And as we turn to this table, and recognize that on this day people all around the globe will be filling and emptying cups of faith, hope and love, may we keep giving and living the full measure, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***