



TODAY WE CONTINUE WITH THE APOSTLE PAUL'S LETTER to the Philippians from the New Testament. In this passage, he talks about emptying ourselves. And this may be the most counter cultural message in late stage capitalism that we could hear. And I think it is the most important message for us to hear. Because we are not an empty culture. We fill our calendars with activities, we fill our down time with screen time. We buy more than we could need or can afford. And we have a difficult time letting go of what we no longer need. So we put it in storage. Fun fact. There are now more self-storage facilities in the U.S. than all Dunkin' Donuts, CVS, and Subway locations combined.

As we enter worship this morning, I offer you this fable:

"Once upon a time, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First she read everything she could get her hands on--history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for.

She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lively, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer.

Finally she put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. Everywhere she went, people told her they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, who lived deep in the Himalayas, a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line. She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

"Yes?" said the kind-looking man who opened it.

Ecstatic she blurted. *"I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question,"* she said, gasping for breath. *"What is the meaning of life?"*

*"Please come in and have some tea,"* the man said.

*"No thank you,"* she said. *I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?"*

*"We shall have tea,"* the man said, so she gave up and came inside.

While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The man listened and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea. She was so busy talking that she did not notice when the tea cup was full, so the man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall. *"What are you doing?"* she yelled when the tea burned her hand. *"It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"*

*"Just so,"* the man said to her. *"You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk."*<sup>1</sup>

Welcome to worship.

### **Philippians 2:1-13**

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 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 exploited, but emptied himself,*

<sup>1</sup> (Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1996. "Stay for tea, Nicodemus." Christian Century 113, no. 6: 195-22. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost)

*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.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave 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.*

*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; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

AS MANY OF YOU KNOW, I WAS ADOPTED AS AN INFANT. 12 years ago, when Washington State opened their sealed adoption records, I got my original birth certificate and was eventually able to meet my birth mother and many other members of both sides of my birth family.. So much of it has been blessing upon blessing. And even the part that has been difficult has been better than the alternative of not knowing—which is how I spent most of my life as part of a closed adoption. I'm the kind of person who wants all the facts, even the difficult ones.

One of the difficult parts of the story involved my birth mother. While I did get to meet her, there was not a relationship to be had there. There are many reasons why that was the case, and I'm not trying to cast aspersions on her or her motives. And she died in May of 2020, so that's where that story ended.

Even before she died, though, I was left with a birth mother who did not want to be in relationship with me. And so I am ever, and always, grateful for the people who do want to be in relationship with me. My adopted parents, my family, my friends, you. I am well loved by many people. AND I was not in relationship with the woman who gave me birth.

Sometimes life is that kind of tension. Where two disparate facts have to reside in your life at the same time. I am very loved by lots of people. AND there is an empty space in my heart where her love could have been, but wasn't.

I've been thinking about this empty space. I picture my heart as a big house, with lots of rooms. And I kept a room for my birth mother in it. I didn't hide her room in the back, where nobody would see the pain of my loss. I'm kept it up front, near the entryway.

I wasn't under any illusion that she wanted the space, or ever planned to inhabit it. For me, the space I held empty for her in my heart was not really about her, or about changing her behavior. It was about me, and who I want to be in the world. I want to be the kind of person who can hold space for other people in my heart. I want to be the kind of person whose heart is big enough to be able to include lots of people. Leaving room for her never didn't require me to kick anyone out of my heart.

To hold empty space, however, is tough. I recognize my tendency to fill the empty spaces in my life.

We fill silence with noise.

We fill time with busy-ness.

We fill 'having enough 'with wanting more.

We fill vulnerability with shows of power.

I've also observed how difficult it is for us in our culture to hold space for grieving, loss, and pain. How often have we tried to do this with all the best of intentions when someone we know has struggled with complicated relationships? Telling them that it's better than they think it is, how we are certain that person loves them, or how a better relationship for us is just around the corner. I recognize that when we do this, we are only trying to protect each other from pain or from a bad ending, or from grief.

And we *can try* to fill the empty spaces in our lives where we have pain, and grief. And we do. It doesn't actually remove the pain. It just hides it, fills it.

Holding empty space is exhausting for me. It's like being in the trash compactor on the Death Star—trying to keep the walls from closing in on Luke, Leia, Han, and Chewie.

We can [ponder the impracticality of the Death Star's trash disposal system](#) over dinner or drinks sometime, but come up with an image that works for you—an image for when you try to hold empty space in your life without filling it. How do you hold empty space without letting outside pressures encroach and push in it's walls.

In some ways, I think our congregation, maybe the church in general, is in an empty space. Or maybe an in between space. We know that the ways we have historically been church together are not working quite the same way in today's culture. We can't quite see what God is working out for our future, but we know it's coming.

So we are holding space, maybe a doorway, between the past and the future. We can't go back to where we've been. We aren't sure what's next. We are at a threshold, where we wait, where we hold space and prepare. We need to keep empty space in our church calendar, and empty energy in our planning, so that we'll have space for what God is dreaming next for us.

The empty space can feel anxious and jangly. As I mentioned in the congregational meeting a few months ago, we're trying to curtail some complexity in our system, to look at our programs and ministries to figure out which ones are sustainable and give life to the vision and to the congregation. What do we need to stop doing so we can do what God is preparing for us? Or what do we need to change so that it is led by the congregation, as opposed to led primarily by the staff? As we stand in this in between space, holding it open so we can wait for God to fill it with what is next for us, we have to lean into that discomfort without feeling like we've done something wrong.

I was talking with a clergy friend about this sermon, and she reminded me of something Barbara Brown Taylor said about this:

**"That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God"<sup>2</sup>**

I was grateful to see Paul's letter to the Philippians as our assigned text today. Because, for me, it is a reminder of the blessing that comes from empty space. Paul describes Jesus as someone who emptied himself.

When Jesus emptied himself, he didn't clear things out so he could fill himself up with power and might. He emptied himself and took the form of a slave, humbling himself with obedience to God, even obedience to the point of death. The world shows us how to be full of power and might and pride and posturing. Jesus shows us how empty space allows for humility, vulnerability, compassion, and obedience.

Paul tells us to let the same mind be in us that was in Jesus. Which is not to say that we will become saviors of the world. It is to remind us to value what he valued.

The opening verses of chapter two started with this:

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ,  
any consolation from love,  
any sharing in the Spirit,  
any compassion and sympathy,  
make my joy complete:  
be of the same mind, having the same love,  
being in full accord and of one mind.  
Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.  
Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*

I confess that the first time I looked at these verses when preparing the sermon, I thought of at least 15 people from the news who needed a reminder not to act from selfish ambition or conceit, and a few more who need some humility to regard others as better than their mean selves.

And then I thought, "*empty yourself, Marci*", and I took a deep breath. *Breathe in God's mercy. Breathe out God's love for the world.*

And I remembered Jesus has yet to ask me to fix anyone else. I suspect he hasn't asked you to fix other people either. And so I read Paul's words as if he meant me, he meant us, that we are supposed to be the one to have compassion and sympathy and humility and concern for the interests of others.



<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Settling for Less," Christian Century, 18 February 1998, p. 169

And I realized if I want to participate in making Paul's joy complete, it will require more empty space, where I leave room in my soul for God to be at work in me, enabling me both to will and to work for God's good pleasure, as Paul said.

It's human instinct, perhaps, to rush in and fill the space, with our power, our judgment of others, our noise, our activity. It's divine instinct to empty.

### **How do you hold empty space in your life? Does it ever feel like a blessing?**

Sitting in silence for 20 minutes each day helps me keep empty space. Routinely going through my closets and cupboards helps me keep empty space. Leaving unscheduled blocks of time in my calendar helps me hold empty space.

When I catch myself judging myself for not being productive enough, I try to reorient my perspective. Taking 40 minutes to walk to church takes more time than taking the bus, *but maybe less time than it takes to find a parking space*. And so when I hear that voice inside asking "do you have time for this right now? You have lots to do!", I try respond to myself with compassion, to remind myself that time spent for my physical and mental health is absolutely what I have time for.

Richard Foster, in his book, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, writes, "In contemporary society, our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in "muchness" and "manyness", he will rest satisfied. Psychiatrist Carl Jung once remarked, "Hurry is not of the Devil; it is the Devil." If we hope to move beyond the superficialities of our culture, including our religious culture, we must be willing to go down into the retreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation." (pg. 15)

How is God inviting us to empty out a space in our lives, so there might be room for us to talk?

I don't recommend emptying everything all at once. But I do invite you to pick one thing this week. Empty out one drawer or cupboard. Empty out one 30-minute block on your calendar and sit in silence, without judging yourself for lost productivity. Empty out one activity, or one thing you want to purchase, or one judgment of someone else, *or judgment of yourself, for that matter*, that is taking up space in your heart.

May it be God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for God's good pleasure. Amen.

