

“The Emptied Self” / Philippians 2:1-11 / 28 September 2014

“Let the same mind be in you,” Paul writes to the church at Philippi, “that was in Christ Jesus, who...emptied himself...and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Empty yourselves? That sounds vaguely New Age, doesn't it? Or even Buddhist! Empty yourselves of all the meaningless fluff that would keep you chasing after your own tail, all the stuff that would keep you small and ingrown. Empty yourselves of the proud achievements, the titles, the possessions. Empty yourselves, so that you can become bigger than you are. This notion of “the emptied self” got stuffed away in the Church attic about 1,700 years ago. It's stored away up there with all the old Christmas pageant bathrobes and cardboard mangers. It's in a box beneath the old choir robes, waiting for its turn to come back out into the light. The image of the emptied self needs to be dusted off and brought back out into circulation. For if we are to live happy, productive lives of faith, we must know the joy of emptying ourselves of a lot of vain stuff. Wouldn't it be nice to let go of all the useless weight, the same old stuff of ego, that keeps showing up in our thinking and our doing?

Several years ago, I got a phone call inviting me to take part in some churchwide event for Presbyterian clergy, I think. I can't remember what the event was, since I wasn't able to go anyway, but I'll always remember the phone call. My office in that church was a dark, cramped hallway lit by blue and red stained glass windows. One of the windows depicted a lion, to represent the gospel writer Mark. There was barely room for a desk and a collection of books on the shelves. I was squeezed into that space one afternoon, trying to write a sermon when the phone rang. The church secretary of forty years had recently been let go, and so I answered the phone myself. I didn't recognize the elderly voice at the other end of the line, but the name rang a loud, insistent bell. The caller said, “My name is Lamar Williamson,” and he went on to describe the reason for his call. It was an event down at Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina, I think. But as soon as I heard the man's name, I stopped listening to what he was saying. “Lamar Williamson?” I pondered. “I know this guy's name. Lamar Williamson...” Of course, all of you are wondering, “Who's Lamar Williamson?” He sounds like a famous athlete, but if that were the case, then I would not know his name. I seemed to recall that I saw his name almost every single day of my life, right there in that tiny office, where my desk was crowded right up against my bookshelves. Books, of course! As the man went on to explain the reason for his call, I scanned the spines of the books that were always just in front of my face, and my eye lighted on it quickly. Lamar Williamson. He'd written a well-known and very good scholarly study of the Gospel of Mark, coincidentally enough, the very same gospel writer who was depicted as a lion in the stained glass window in that room. Lamar's book was almost thirty years old, but still a standard text for preachers dealing in Mark. In fact, I'd used it just that past Easter to prepare the biggest sermon of the year.

At last, I managed to say, “You're *the* Lamar Williamson?” The man was taken aback by the question. He said, “Well, it was my father's name, too. But I can tell by your voice that you're too young to have known him.” I really wasn't trying to flatter the fellow, but clergy get so few brushes with celebrity—(unless you count Elijah Wood and Vin Diesel who just finished shooting a film at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, here in Pittsburgh; the pastors of that church put the photos on FaceBook.) I told him that I often refer to his book on the Gospel of Mark, and he was clearly very flattered. He said that he'd been calling pastors about this conference for weeks, and no one yet had recognized his name. I was astonished. He's best known for his book on Mark, which just happens to be my favorite gospel, but he'd been a professor and wrote three or four other books that were still in print. He wanted to know about me. Where had I gone to seminary, who were my New Testament professors, for that was his field. We chatted for a long time, like old friends, until at last he sighed and started to take his leave. “You know,” he said, “this kind of conversation makes an old man feel good. It's nice to be recognized, many years after retirement, by someone so far away. It's good for my ego...but it's very bad for my soul.” He paused a moment and said, “Recognition is like ice cream. It tastes great, but it's not good for you. Most things that are good for the ego are bad for the soul.”

Rarely had I met a New Testament scholar who cared to wax devotional about the value of humility. Lamar suggested some more recent books than his on the Gospel of Mark and said goodbye. But his words have stayed with me. "It's good for my ego, but bad for my soul."

We all value humility in other people, and we try to cultivate it in ourselves. Humility is one of those beautiful qualities that makes a person's best attributes shine all the brighter. Nobody likes a braggart. But what does Paul mean when he tells us that Jesus "emptied himself" and bids us do the same? How can I be emptied, when I'm made up of all the stuff I've accomplished, and achieved, and survived down through the years? How can I be emptied when it took me so long just to get enough sheepskins to hide the barrenness of my walls? Don't I need all my stuff just to show you and the world who I am? Why should I have to be emptied of things it's taken me a lifetime to attain?

In this passage of his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul is quoting some ancient hymn, perhaps the "Amazing Grace" of his day. The language is poetic and not at all typical of Paul's writing style. New testament Scholars, like Lamar Williamson, believe this is a familiar song that Paul's readers would have recognized. And a bit like "Amazing Grace," it's a song of humility. Jesus emptied himself, the song declares. Jesus humbled himself. He did not grasp at power or fame. "Let this same mind be also in you," the humble mind, the unselfish mind, the emptied self. There's a \$5 word for this doctrine of self-emptying that took place in Jesus. It's called *kenosis*, it means the letting go of all the stuff we carry around—the baggage we drag into our relationships, the ego issues, the sadness, and fears, the insecurities, the need for recognition. Isn't it interesting that even Jesus had to let go of a lot of stuff, apparently, in order to get on with his mission in life, in order to become the Jesus that both he and the world needed him to be? And if Jesus had to empty himself of so much stuff, what does that say about you and me?

Oh, it's heavy, the stuff we drag from place to place. You don't need me to tell you that. The good name, the lovely home, the social standing that's taken years to attain. We've got successful marriages, hard-earned degrees, titles, respect. There are social circles to fit into and youngsters to inspire. We've got boards and committees looking to us for leadership. Charities send us thank-you-letters, too. We hold degrees, and awards, and some of us might even hold a record or two for something or another. We invest our lives in the betterment of the world; it's nothing to be ashamed of, and what is life in this world if you can't feel pride in the work of your own hands at the end of a day well spent? Attainments, both visible and invisible, make up a life, in the end. Why should we hide them behind a veil of humility when we've worked so hard at them? These things are clues to our identity, and so they must be kept polished. We could spend a lifetime just going over our stuff with a dust rag, making sure it never loses its luster.

But let me tell you a secret that you already know, because that's what pulpits are for...reminding people of things that, in their heart of hearts, they know to be true. Let me tell you a secret that you and I sometimes forget, and it is this: We all long to lay the burdens of the self down from time to time. We yearn to empty ourselves of all the heavy stuff that has to be displayed, the educations, the erudition, the accomplishments, the connections. Yes, it's true that we love to fly them like a flag, and we pull them out to show the world like a new grandma pulls out the photo album. But we also long for times and a places where they don't matter, where we can just be ourselves without them. Even Marie Antoinette, in all her glory, kept a cottage out behind the Palace of Versailles where she sneaked away to take off her wig and bake bread with her own hands. We long to be known beyond all the stuff that we use to identify ourselves. We drag all this pretty stuff around with us, hoping that people will notice it, but a part of us wants nothing more than to be free of its weight, its endless display and responsibilities. Wouldn't it be sweetest rest to stop dragging all our accumulated years of stuff from city to city, from workplace to home, from childhood to old age? Wouldn't it be great to find a nice storage unit where we could stash it for a while and strike off on our own to see how the world likes us without the proud badges that we've earned?

I tell my own stories because there are only two people I know well enough to talk about in

painful detail...but talking about one of them could afford me a night on the couch. Here's an example of a moderately modest fellow going through life weighted down by all the meaningless stuff of ego. This past Thursday I was at a meeting of Pittsburgh Presbytery—which, if you're not Presbyterian, is a regional gathering of all the leadership of all the churches. At this meeting, there were names of clergypersons up on the screen. I was listed among other pastors serving on a certain committee, and I noticed that many of the others were listed as “Rev. Dr.,” whereas I was simply “Rev.” Now, I've noticed it before. In fact, each time I receive a piece of mail from the presbytery, I'm reminded that they seem to be unaware of one of my honorifics. And I've always simply dismissed it. But with it up there on the big screen like that for all the world to see, well, I allowed myself to dwell on it. “I know it's not an intentional slight, but how come the guy down the street gets his due, and I don't get mine? I mean, it's not egotistical to want a little recognition for something I worked hard to attain, is it? I mean, sure it's not a PhD, but it's not an honorary doctorate either! I earned it! I worked long for it! Do I have to call the presbytery and tell them to make a correction? That would be an awkward conversation. 'Um, excuse me. Hi. I'd like to be known as the Rev. Dr. from now on. Please make a note of it.'” In a moment's time, the feeling passed, in part because I was already thinking about the nature of the emptied self, in preparation for this sermon. And the words of Lamar Williamson returned to me. “Recognition is like ice cream. It's good for the ego but bad for the soul.” Humility! The emptied self is so much healthier and happier! It's got better self esteem, for it's happy just to be.

Walking into the empty sanctuary of his church, a minister was possessed by a wave of mystical rapture, and threw himself onto the ground before the Table proclaiming, “Lord, I'm unworthy!” Seeing the minister in such a state, the organist felt profoundly moved by similar emotions. He too, threw himself down in front of the Table, proclaiming, “Lord, I'm unworthy!” Then, way in the back of the church, the janitor threw himself to the ground, and he too shouted, “Lord, I'm unworthy.” Whereupon, the minister turned to the organist and whispered, “Oh, look who thinks he's unworthy!”

It's said that truly humble people are the ones who don't squirm when you give them a compliment. Humility has a PR problem, which should probably be expected. Since Jessica's departure, I've been picking the hymns. (I'm open to suggestions!) In preparation for this week's service, I went to the hymnal to find some hymns about humility, and there were none listed. There were hymns about mercy, and love, and faithfulness, and compassion, but humility is so humble it didn't even make it into the book. And humility doesn't care. Humility is the recognition that our strengths and our weaknesses alike are largely not our doing. It's the freedom from living for praise or criticism. Humility is the emptying of the self from all the egotistical thoughts that poison and bind us. There are so many things to live for, but the vain conceits of the ego will always disappoint. No amount of praise or recognition will ever be enough for the person who craves it.

And so, how do we empty ourselves of all the heavy stuff of ego that keeps us angry and tired? We'd all love to care less when someone forgets us, overlooks us, suspects us, ridicules us. Sometimes we know we're being small, we'd like to shrug it off, but we just want our due. Try this when someone steps on the toes of your ego. First, hold the feeling up to the light, the anger, the offense. Own the feeling. Touch the anger, let it pass. Touch the desire to demand recognition, let it pass. Remind yourself that God and your conscience know the truth. In the bigger scheme of things, your contribution adds goodness to the life of the world—even if no one ever recognizes it. Perhaps *especially* if no one ever recognizes it! God and your conscience alone are your audience and judge. “Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus, who humbled himself, who emptied himself.” Besides, “What's good for the ego is usually bad for the soul.” Amen.