

Empty By Choice
Philippians 2:5-11
March 16, 2008(Palm/Passion Sunday)
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
David Beckett, D.Min.

An old fable that has been passed down for generations tells about an elderly man who was traveling with a boy and a donkey. As they walked through a village, the man was leading the donkey and the boy was walking behind. The townspeople said the old man was a fool for not riding, so to please them he climbed up on the animal's back.

When they came to the next village, the people said the old man was cruel to let the child walk while he enjoyed the ride. So, to please them, he got off and set the boy on the animal's back and continued on his way. In the third village, people accused the child of being lazy for making the old man walk, and the suggestion was made that they both ride. So the man climbed on and they set off again. In the fourth village, the townspeople were indignant at the cruelty to the donkey because he was made to carry two people. So the frustrated man was last seen carrying the donkey down the road.

Well, Jesus was not as interested in pleasing the crowd as much as this man. He didn't care what he looked like to others. That was obvious. He entered Jerusalem mounted on a borrowed half-grown donkey and, accompanied by the rabble that always seemed to hang around him, bumped his way through the city gates on the outskirts of town. That was the whole event. There was no more to it. The crowd lost its energy and momentum and quickly dispersed. Someone returned the donkey to its rightful owner. Jesus and his close friends began to wander around to see the sights. Yet, what is really odd about this whole thing is that Jesus entered the city filled with confidence in the power of his weakness. He knew his mission and was not about to get sidetracked. His road was leading him to the cross, and nothing but the cross.

There are two key words, one of which is in today's epistle lesson: Kenosis, which means "to be emptied" and Plerosis, which means "to be filled up." When self is emptied (kenosis) and opened up for the filling (plerosis) of God's spirit, we are able to receive into our lives the power of God's redeeming love. When Paul urged the Philippians to be of the same mind as Christ, to imitate him in humility and obedience, he was saying, "Humble yourselves and empty out." Jesus emptied himself in order to come to us in humble human form. And so you and I are called to empty ourselves of our pride and self-confidence in order to be filled with the divine love Christ offers us.

Let's talk about KENOSIS. What does it mean to "empty yourself?" First of all we're not talking about self-debasement. We're not talking about taking what self-esteem we may have and grinding it into the dust. Quite the contrary. It is because of our God-given self-esteem that we can empty out what doesn't belong.

Let's look at it this way. We all have a basic desire for God, for love. Every human person who has ever lived has this desire. The spiritual journey then consists of our seeking to satisfy this desire for love. The problem occurs when we try to fill this desire with things OTHER than the one, true God. And what are those things which

replace God deep within our being? They can be as big as a spouse, a job, a house, a car, getting our own way. Or it can be as small as a TV program, a fishing trip, winning a game, or even a cookie.

Cookie! Now there's a sensitive subject. I'd like to talk with you about cookies. You see, when our children were young I assumed the identity of the Head Cookie Monster. I always got more cookies than the kids, and I used to have them for dessert after lunch and dinner. I had never thought about my love for cookies replacing my love for God, but I think there's something to it. One time I decided to drastically cut down on my cookie intake. I experienced what could be called cookie withdrawal. What happened when I craved a cookie is that I heard this little voice saying, "You really don't need that cookie." And it's true. My attention didn't need to focus on cookies. It needs to focus on God. And so in a strange kind of way the emptying of my life of cookies enabled a kind of filling up with God.

But a problem exists when my family doesn't identify a similar need in their lives to empty themselves of cookies. It doesn't help matters any when my family breaks out double chocolate chip cookies, or double stuff Oreos!

You want to know to what or whom you are addicted? Just try to go without it for awhile. You'll soon find out. It's one thing to be addicted to cookies or coffee or our morning newspaper. It's a different thing to be filled with the many images we have of ourselves. You know what these are. These are the "pictures" of ourselves we want others to have of us. Every human person lives with these images, images which then determine how we act with others. For example, if you have an image of yourself as a good athlete, then you will work to keep up that image. Some of your money may go towards maintaining that image. You'll buy athletic gear, perhaps a membership at a health club, maybe even a home exercise machine.

There's nothing wrong with having images of ourselves. Positive images can be healthy. But it is important that we are aware of the images we have of ourselves. Because sometimes we invest great amounts of energy into defending and maintaining our self-images...images that do not lead us to a life of grace, openness, and love. Let me tell you a story that happened to me.

Several years ago I had finished dinner at our home in Soldotna and had some time before going to a Bible study. Everyone else in the family seemed busy so I sat down in front of our computer and started to play a computer flight game. I was zipping all over the skies in my jet airplane when suddenly someone appeared at the front door. It was Billy Still, my superintendent! I didn't even stop to think. Immediately I started pushing buttons to exit my computer game. Why? Because I had an image of myself as a pastor, an image I wanted my superintendent to maintain. And this image did not include playing mindless computer games!

Isn't it ridiculous how we play games with ourselves? I had to laugh at myself for such silly behavior. I should have said, "Billy, do you want to fly this bird upside down with me?" The point is that I need to relax and let go of some of the silly things I do to maintain a certain image of myself.

There is a picture of an elegantly dressed woman who is holding a cup of coffee. Her little finger is cocked ever so daintily, and her face reveals complete self-assurance. Unfortunately, this woman does not yet know that her slip has collapsed around her

feet. The caption reads: "Confidence is what you have before you understand the situation."

What are some of the things you do to protect your image of yourself? We can't escape such behaviors altogether, but we can help each other become aware of those images that keep us from being open to the love of God and other people. Lots of folks have everything going for them...a great family, nice home, good job...and they are unhappy and soulsick. They find it very hard to give and receive love. And one of the reasons just might be that they are hiding behind an image they have of themselves, an image that must be maintained at all costs, an image that cuts them off emotionally and spiritually from those they love most. These are the kinds of things that need to be emptied from our lives. For it is in the emptying process that God fills us up!

I confess that one of my past addictions was to the TV program MASH. I have seen every episode at least 20 times and can predict much of the dialogue. On one show Colonel Sherman Potter, the commander of the 4077 MASH in Korea, gave away his beloved horse, Sophie, to an aging Korean former cavalry soldier. It was a tremendous gift and deeply appreciated by the Korean soldier. The next day his daughter returned Sophie to Colonel Potter with the news that her father had died that night. His gift had enabled her father to die with dignity.

It is a strange kind of paradox that we often receive when we give. When we are emptied of our addictions and comfortable images, something new and exciting fills us up!

A long time ago Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey on a mission of humility and love. We must humble ourselves if we would dare to accept this love. For Christ emptied himself and became obedient, even to death upon a Roman cross...all because of his deep love for you and me!

At its best, our earthly life is like a Palm Sunday parade, a procession of faith and great expectations in the face of certain failure -- or it will be nothing but a resignation to futility. Our excitement is always going to be out of focus. What we bless today, we sometimes betray tomorrow. It is the cycle of human life.

But despite this, or perhaps because of this, we must take our places in the parade. We must relive our baptisms and renew our vows, no matter how often we break them. The knowledge of his goodness must wipe away the knowledge of our own evil, as rushing water washes away debris.

We will never be worthy, but he is. If it's ever going to be -- that glory and hallelujah in our hearts -- it must be now! We can't wait to be worthy or the stones would have to do our work for us. Our hearts, however wounded, must give way once more to anticipation and proclaim that the blessed one comes in the name of the Lord!