

*Love Freely Poured*

Philippians 2:1-13

Whitefish UMC

September 28, 2008

- † With election season here in full force, you've probably had enough of surveys and polls. But just for fun, answer this question, true or false: "The saying, 'God helps those who help themselves' comes from the Bible."
- † If you're like me, you were taught that God does help those who help themselves as if it were straight from the Sermon on the Mount. (Or as one friend has rephrased it, "The Sermon on the Amount.")
- † But you can't find that phrase in the mouths of Jesus, Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, or Paul. Not even in the mouth of Job! Instead, the saying comes from the voice of Benjamin Franklin.
- † And there's a lot of truth in the fact that hard work and responsibility do result in rewards. But here's an interesting statistic, reported in an article by Bill McKibben in *Harper's* magazine a few years ago.
- † "While 85 percent of us Americans call ourselves Christian, 75 percent of us believe that the Bible teaches: 'God helps those who help themselves.' That is neither biblical nor Christian."
- † "The thing is," says McKibben, "not only is Franklin's wisdom not biblical; it's counter-biblical. Few ideas could be further from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor. On this essential matter, most Americans—most American Christians—

- are simply wrong, as if 75 percent of American scientists believed that Newton proved gravity causes apples to fly up.”
- † Ouch. Who is this Bill McKibben anyway? I first read his work 20 years ago when I worked in environmental policy as a state agency director for the Legislature. I was asked by my local church to teach a class on “Caring For God’s Earth” for United Methodist Women’s School for Christian Mission.
  - † Here’s how he describes himself in the *Harper’s* article: “I’m a Christian. Not a professional one; I’ve never progressed further in the church hierarchy than Sunday school teacher at my backwoods Methodist church. But I’ve spent most of my Sunday mornings in a pew. I grew up in church youth groups and stayed active most of my adult life—started homeless shelters in church basements, served soup at the food pantry, climbed to the top of the rickety ladder to put the star on the church Christmas tree.”
  - † With these credentials, McKibben points to the fact that America’s brand of Christianity has not produced many evidences of the kind of gospel-driven life we have supposedly embraced.
  - † “Americans have hijacked the teachings of Jesus,” he says, turning them into an endorsement for a life that is all about self-fulfillment, prosperity, and success. Many of the nation’s largest and fastest growing churches are all about just that: how to make your life bigger and better and richer.
  - † So, we ask, “What’s wrong with success and self-fulfillment?” Nothing: It’s the American Way, after all. The problem, the paradox, arises when it becomes the main thing. Which is where today’s scripture from Paul’s letter to the Philippians comes in.

- † Psychiatrist Gerald May writes, “There is a cultural myth that says, ‘If you are well-adjusted, and if you are living your life properly, you will feel fulfilled, satisfied...’ Stated conversely, the myth says, ‘If you are not satisfied and fulfilled, there is something wrong with you.’”
- † Not wanting to be wrong or maladjusted, we often fill our days with activities, silent spaces with talking and busyness, stomachs with more than enough food, houses with “stuff,” and the spacious parts of our souls with data and distractions.
- † Given this myth, and what May calls our culture’s “addiction to fulfillment,” this week’s passage from Philippians 2 raises questions. Was there something wrong with Jesus when he—the One who had ready access to all fulfillment, power, everything—chose to *empty* himself?
- † And was Paul serious when he suggested that we, the church, be of the “same mind” as Jesus? If Paul was serious, then what should we empty ourselves of...and why?
- † This question—the what’s and why’s of Christ-like emptiness—ought to be of great concern for us as stewards of God’s good gifts of life. Gifts like our time, our days, our food, our stuff, our souls, and our empty spaces.
- † So we look to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, for guidance. Towards the end of his life, Wesley grew very concerned that his followers were “laying up treasures upon earth”—that is, filling their lives with so many “riches” and so much ambition for wealth, power, status. We read this passage in bible study this week: Matthew 6:19-21, which tells us instead to focus on the richness of God.

- † Wesley, following Jesus, thought that this “fullness” of things got in the way of their sharing the gifts of God’s grace with the poor. But he also saw that this emphasis on “fullness” stifled the people’s own spiritual growth.
- † Now Wesley believed in and practiced hard work, in earning all he could. He wanted his followers to do the same. But he became convinced that “giving all you can” was the antidote for greed and the single-minded accumulation of “fullness.”
- † Wesley wrote: “...by giving all I can, I am effectually secured from ‘laying up treasures upon earth.’ Yea, and I am secured from either desiring or endeavouring it as long as I give all I can give.”
- † He spent his lifetime emptying himself of everything—beyond the basic essentials of adequate food, clothing, and shelter—so that others would receive the gifts of grace through him, and so that he would remain continually open and reliant upon God’s grace.
- † He was so committed to giving all he could that in 1744 he wrote, “When I die, if I leave behind me ten pounds...you and all mankind may bear witness against me, that I have lived and died a thief and a robber.”
- † As it turns out, he died with empty pockets and (from what we can tell from his writings and actions,) a very full spirit.
- † When Paul reminded the people in Philippi, a city that had essentially become a retirement village for veterans of the Roman army, of Jesus’ way of fullness through emptiness, they might have heard his message in much the same way we do. Why should they take on the same mind as Jesus, the One who emptied himself of everything they held dear?

- † Like the tax collectors and prostitutes who would have to find new livelihoods and ways of living in relationship with others, these powerful Philippians would have to start new lives, according to the rules of God’s household.
- † In this household, they would become servants—like Christ—emptying out their pride and honor, resources, old ways of thinking, entire lives for the benefit of one another as Christ’s body. And in doing that, their lives would become wide open to receiving God’s other beloved children and to fullness of the Holy Spirit.
- † Sounds hard, doesn’t it? It’s alright for Jesus, maybe, and Paul, and even John Wesley. But not so much for us. I don’t know about you, but emptiness is not something I crave. When I experience it, I often find myself resorting to buying something I really don’t need. Or eating something for which I am not really hungry.
- † Does that fill the empty spaces? No. It only makes our house more cluttered and my figure fuller. So I want to practice cultivating the empty spaces in my life to make more room for God’s grace. And I want you to do that too.
- † Dr. Gerald May writes, “Emptiness, yearning, incompleteness: these unpleasant words hold a hope for incomprehensible beauty. It is precisely in these seemingly abhorrent qualities of ourselves—qualities that we spend most of our time trying to fix or deny—that the very thing we most long for can be found: hope for the human spirit, freedom for love.”
- † Dr. May suggests the following steps for welcoming and entering times of holy emptiness:

1. "...look for spaces that occur naturally in your life...Perhaps you find little natural spaces after you have completed some work, times that you stretch and look around and just be for a moment. Could you expand those times, savor them a little longer?" Are there times like that that you usually fill by watching TV, reading, drinking, eating, texting, browsing the internet? Could you just be present a while longer in those moments before moving to fill them up?
2. "...try to set aside some regular time each day that is simply and solely dedicated to just being in the presence of God."
3. "...keep an eye open for longer spaces. Consider extended spiritual retreats, quiet days, or prayer or meditation groups where you can spend some time without distraction and just notice God's grace."
4. When you find yourself resisting the spaciousness of just being present to God's nearness in the moment, pray for help: "God, you are here now; help me be here now."

† All well and good, we are tempted to say. At least I am. But I am a **BUSY PERSON!**

† And then I encounter the words of Etty Hillesum, a young woman whose writings survived her death in a Nazi prison camp. You've heard about Etty from me before, but as a reminder, her book *An Interrupted Life* is a powerful witness to the experience of God's grace.

† Etty wrote: "...turn your innermost being into a vast empty plain, so that something of God can enter you, and something of Love, too."

- † And when that emptiness is filled with God and Love, it naturally overflows into your life and the lives of others. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”
- † That’s what we are created for. We are not created to be fearful, self-obsessed idols. We are created to live out the gospel of Jesus, not the gospel of Ben Franklin.
- † And in this time of excess and fear, doesn’t that make the wisest sense?
- † May we find a way to clear space for God and for Love so that we might be of the same mind as Christ Jesus.
- † Let us pray together the prayer of Covenant Faithfulness, written by John Wesley.
- † Amen.

Sources:

William McKibben, “The Christian Paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong,” [www.harpers.org](http://www.harpers.org)

John A. Cairns, “Knowing God: Round One,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Many of the ideas for this sermon are derived from a weekly stewardship resource entitled “Grace and Gratitude,” assembled by Bill Mullette-Bauer and Tanya Barrett and Tom Wilson in the United Methodist Foundation of the Northwest.