

That is Empty, That's My Son **Philippians 2:1-11**

Robert W. Bertram

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Sometimes ordination sermons are addressed exclusively to the one who is being ordained, with the congregation invited, like eavesdroppers, to listen in. This ordination sermon is addressed to the whole congregation, including you, Steve, and you, Jim, and you, Gary, and including me.

With this magnificent text from his Epistle to the Philippians, Paul takes us back to one of Jesus' own original, most central messages. That is, which ever of the two alternatives you and I choose in life - and there are two of them -- we stand to lose either way. As Jesus had put it, "Whoever would gain his life will lose it...." That is one alternative, a sure loser. But then you would expect, wouldn't you, that the opposite alternative, the one to which Jesus invites us, would be a no-lose situation. He offers nothing of the kind, nor does he ever claim to. All he says, by way of his own alternative, is: "Whoever would lose her life, for my sake and the gospel's, will gain it." Both ways you lose. Both ways you lose everything. There is no third alternative. But there is losing and then there is losing. And between the two kinds of losing lies all the difference in the world, and not of this world alone – the difference between losing (period) and losing (comma).

Paul now picks up this same tradition from Jesus and puts it in other words. There are two ways, Paul says, for us to fulfill our ambitions, two ways to fill our lives full, two ways to live the full life. (That is the language Paul is using here, the language of "full" versus "empty", solid versus hollow). But regardless of which of the two ways we choose, says Paul, we shall inevitably, in either case, come out not full but empty -- except.... Except that there is a way to be empty, and then there is a way to be empty. The two ways are not, one of them, more empty and, the other way, less empty. No, both empties are total. Both ways are awe-full -- spell the word either way you wish -- as awful as dying. But the one empty is final, ultimate. The other empty is only penultimate. The one empty, the kind that lasts, comes precisely from our trying to hang onto what we have. (Paul speaks of our "clutching", our "grasping the things of the self.") When we do that sort of grasping for our own lives, that clutching onto ourselves, we only lose; and that is all we do. That losing is for keeps. When in the end our greedy grip upon ourselves will be broken, what we shall find is that inside the grip there is nothing. "Whoever wishes to gain her life will lose it." -- But then there is also that other way to be empty.

Both empties are constant options also for Christians, and they both continue to be options for us until the day we die. That is why, in the very next sentence, Paul has to remind the Philippian Christians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

(2:12) He admits that for himself as well his constant struggle to so lose as to gain, rather than merely to lose, is a struggle which is never over and he never has it made and the results are not in until The Last Analysis. (3:7-14) Paul's appeal, in other words - his appeal to us to empty ourselves so that we can be filled rather than fill ourselves with only more emptiness - is directed also to folks like ourselves, even though we are already in Christ Jesus.

We are in Christ, and yet we also are not. This is a point which the old translation of this text used to miss. The King James Version read: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." (2:5) But that translation could give the misimpression that Paul's readers did not yet have the "mind which was in Christ Jesus", in other words, that they were not yet Christians. That is not at all what Paul says. They did have the mind of Christ. And yet they did not. They could still go either way. So could we.

Perhaps a better translation, or paraphrase, would be: "The mind which you already have in Christ Jesus, have also toward one another." Or: what it is about Christ Jesus which interests you- let that interest you in one another as well. Or as Moffatt translates it: "Treat one another with the same spirit as you experience in Christ Jesus." The attitude you do have from Christ is to be directed toward one another, else it is not Christ's attitude at all. For that is what his attitude toward you was for, for you to lose yourselves - as he did -- for one another. That way, though you still lose, you do not go to waste, anymore than he did. But if instead you seize and clutch Christ's interest in you as an end in itself, as a way of hanging onto yourselves to keep from being emptied for one another, then all you will do is lose - for sure and for keeps, Christ or no Christ. And the glory you so wanted to gain will turn out in the end to be "vainglory", kenodoxia, an empty-handed winning, and hollow victory.

This awesome struggle "in fear and trembling" between the two kinds of emptying confronts our kind of Christian especially. You and I in the church, especially in a very churchly church like this one, do have the mind which was in Christ Jesus in special measure. That is, in a congregation like this (and mine is similar) we are mindful, extraordinarily so, of how Christ is minded toward each one of us. Our minds are full of Christ, our worship services brim over with Christ-consciousness, the doctrine in our preaching and teaching is renowned for its preoccupation with Christ's gospel. Who is better taken care of by Christ than we? And we know it. We know it cold. But even with that kind of Christ-mentality, we could - perhaps we more easily than other Christians could - still lose. Lose (period). We could if the mind we have of Christ Jesus is not the mind we have toward one another - and toward others, and still others. For then it would not be the mind of Christ Jesus in the first place. Then all it would be is a kind of salvational egotism in the name of Jesus.

To make matters even more difficult, Christians like you and me can so smoothly rationalize this double-mindedness of ours with the consolations of Christian doctrine, in which some of us major. For instance, we might take refuge in the grand old distinction between faith and works, alibying that our faith, our faith in Christ, seems to be reasonably solid and then admitting generously that it is merely our works which might

still use a bit of filling up. Not so. The problem is rather a problem of bad faith. More than likely we don't really trust that the mind of Christ will work in our relationships with one another. And that, to call it by its name, is out-and-out unbelief. Or, we might resort to that grand old Lutheran distinction between the two kingdoms and distort it into saying that God's righthand kingdom, his mercy, is how he deals with us whereas his lefthand kingdom, treating people on their merits, is how we are to deal with one another -- when, for example, we say, "Now let's be practical." But that sort of practicality is really quite the opposite. Practically, it is dead-end.

What is the way out, also for us? Paul seems to know no better way for relaxing the Philippians' anxious clutch upon themselves than simply to turn them away from themselves and to tell them once more, for the um-teenth time, the story of Jesus, how really he is minded. Would you like to hear that story once again, for the thousandth time: Jesus' way out, all the way out, until there was nothing left of him -- except to win?

Though he already had the character of God, says Paul, this Jesus did not believe that grasping onto his deity was the way to equal God. Not that he was unwilling to equal God, but not by means of clutching. So he did the opposite. He gave up his God-shape and instead took the form of a human being. But that wasn't all. That was not yet the great humiliation. For as our Lutheran Confessions remind us, there is nothing demeaning in simply being human. That by itself, being human, still carries great dignity. No, becoming human was only the precondition for Christ's real humiliation. "And being found in human form he humbled himself...." How then? He "became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (2:8) That is, he identified not just with human beings but with human beings as losers, with people who sooner or later, for all their hanging on, lose everything. He took the part of the empties, and "emptied himself." The point in the Creed which marks his deepest degradation is not "and was made man", but even moreso "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." As Paul says elsewhere, "he was made sin for us." And friends, that is empty.

But then hear what happens. Hear it as though you never heard it before. "Therefore," says Paul, just because this Jesus so emptied himself of his God-form for us, for that very reason "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name." Jesus, you remember, was never forced into this self-emptying, anymore than you and I are. He could have taken another option, as he was tempted to in the desert after his baptism. But instead he declines that seductive option with a huge Messianic "aw pshaw". For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame. He set his eyes steadfastly to go to Jerusalem. But what a way to go. That is going out with class. "That," says God, "is how Jesus equals me." And God names him accordingly, above every name that is named, "The Christ, the Son of the living God."

"The Son?" So that is his Name! But then that makes the God whom Jesus was equalling his own Father. So here the whole scheme was, all along, a family affair. And isn't that the happiest part of the happy ending, or almost the happiest part, namely, that the God whom Jesus equals turns out to be not just "God" but Jesus' "Father". Here God was in on the plot from the beginning. From the beginning God had wanted to be

equalled and he wanted to be equalled this way, and never for a moment did he feel upstaged by this daring kind of rivalry. What a fantastically good sport! With all the self-effacing fondness of a proud Jewish papa – or why not with all the warm-bosomed love of a doting Jewish mama?--God clutches this all-time loser to herself-himself and exclaims, "That's my Boy!" "That's my kind of chutzpah!" So God raised him from the dead - "the Son at my right hand."

But then comes the truly happiest part of the happy ending. (And how Paul enjoys hamming it up!) So delighted is God to be equalled by this Son that everything -- in heaven and on earth and under the earth - is put in the Son's Name as well. Everything: that includes you and me. We, too, are placed under the Name, not only of the Father but also of the Son and of their Healing Spirit. This Jesus walked into our empty lives and said, I'll sign for those lives, for those losers. The Father says, "You want them? You get them." And so the Father gave us to him. Ever since, we have been travelling under his name, the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, into which we have been baptized. Offhand we may seem to be a rather dubious reward for all of Jesus' troubles. But then we have not been asked to pass judgment on the Father's taste but merely to enjoy it. And isn't it that finally, our sheer enjoying of that story, which will free us to give ourselves away if anything can: the happy fact that we have already been given away to the all-time Loser with the winning Name? Doesn't that just fill your day, you losers -- for one another?

And now to you, Steve and Jim and Gary, an apostolic P. S. Take a cue here from Paul. He, too, speaks of his own emptying and filling up as a minister of Jesus Christ. But notice what it is that fills him up. Make my joy full, he entreats the Philippians. What is it about the Philippians that would make Paul's joy full? Is it what they do for him, their pastor? No, not that, but rather what they do for one another: counting others better than themselves, being of the same mind with one another. (2:2, 3) It is their being for one another, not first of all their being for him, that fills Paul with apostolic joy. By the same token, the token of the Cross of the all-time Loser with the winning Name - Paul can afford to talk big and can offer to take the whole Philippian congregation to free drinks at his expense. As he says, "Even if I am to be poured out as a libation [a drink-offering], upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all." (2:17) I pray that for you, Steve and Jim, and Gary, that kind of self-emptying chutzpah, for which the Father says to each of you, too: "That's my boy."

Robert W. Bertram
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