

“Emptying” by Kevin Barwick

July 13, 2014

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

I invite you to close your eyes. You just found out you had the winning numbers for the mega billion jackpot. You are completely taken by surprise, and completely excited; anticipating getting that 2.3 billion dollar check! They said it's waiting for you at the bank. You just have to go down and pick it up. You rush to the bank. The bank person and the Great Lottery King royally usher you back to the vault where the safety deposit boxes are. The “King” slowly and formally pulls out your box and, with a huge smile, hands you the key. Your heart is pounding in anticipation. You carefully insert the key and turn. The lid clicks open. You then lift the opening to find... to find... that it's EMPTY!

Good morning everyone. I'd like to begin today with a confession. I don't like being empty, void, with nothing. It was true in preparing for this sermon. I usually have something that forms inside of me. His time was different. It just wasn't coming! Nervously, I told my mission group this past week. Kate reassured me just to let it percolate. So, throughout the week, I prayed, and waiting and percolated. I prayed and waited and percolated some more. Each time I prayed, it seemed that God said to me, Be Quiet and Listen. I thought, okay. Percolation. Percolation. I was tired of percolation. Nothing came, I thought. So, I decided to speak on “nothing.” Sermon's over! In reality, this sense of “nothingness” and “emptiness” is everything.

Yes, I don't like being empty, void, with nothing. For that matter, I also don't' like having “nothing to do.” One of my addictions is that I sometimes feel like a “nothing” when I'm

not doing anything!

When I'm empty, especially when I was "promised" something by the Lottery King, I sometimes feel cheated, insecure and frustrated and/or at least disillusioned. My nicely packaged, antiseptically controlled world is rocked! My knee-jerk reaction is often to... regain control, of course! Or, at least to hang on to something to prop me up. Some people call it finding balance. Does this make any sense to you?

When you came in each of you were given a card, and were told *not* to turn it over. You see on your card that your "gift" is on the other side. Think for a moment. Dream for a moment what you want your royal Gifter to present you (after all... Didn't God say that you only need to ask and you shall receive. Or, knock and the door will be opened to you. Or, the Almighty owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Of course, he would share some with us. Or, the Devine cares for us more than the birds that feed.). What do you think God needs to gift you? Take a moment to write it down on your card (don't censor it). What are you hoping to receive from God? Share with someone next to you? Now, turn your card over, and you'll find your "gift."

Most of us in our culture, particularly in our Christian, probably White and wealthy, entitled culture, we believe the theology that God works similar to the old slot machines, i.e. when we are ready for riches that we need only to pull the lever for God to pour her blessings down in miraculous spectacular fashion, and all will be good.

What we fail to realize... What *I* tend to fail to realize is that the blessings are not in the *receiving*, but in the *asking*. Don't get me wrong. I would gladly receive that billion-dollar lottery check. But what I mean is that we usually receive more-deeper, long-lasting riches—from the *process* of the struggle, the waiting, the emptiness, than the actual outcome itself. We don't usually, however, realize it until much later.

This "emptiness," I believe, is critical in living as Christians, or the Christ in us. Emptiness, nothingness, openness must be alive in us. Listen to these words from the Apostle Paul,

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his or her own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of humankind. ⁸ And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Just like in 12 Step programs, Step One is Step One for a purpose. It says, *I have come to realize/ we finally admitted*

we were powerless over [the addiction]—that our lives had become unmanageable. It all starts with a complete recognition of the need to deplete our old selves before we will be replete with a new self.

There is no quick fix. There are no religious tenets to follow to find perfection. We often think that our goal, the end result, the “blessing” if you will, is to be good Christians, to do the right thing. And we’re disappointed in ourselves when we didn’t end up doing it “religiously right.” Embracing our flaws, however, i.e. our powerlessness, is step one in our journey. We are richer people who have gone through struggle and have learned through the experience. You’ve probably heard this before that when the Navajo weave those beautifully crafted rugs; they always weave in a noticeable flaw on the back corner. We forget or don’t realize that “perfection” is not the elimination of flaws, but the incorporation of all of them to make a richer whole.

This emptying comes in different forms. It may mean to push against something you’ve been neglecting for a long time. It may be talking to someone with whom you feel a disconnect. It may be intentionally committing to do your deeper internal emotional and spiritual work. Whatever it is, it’s not intending to be “nice.” (“Nice” is not in the New Testament!). It is, however, a being with..., a struggling with..., a fighting for..., a loving while..., a building up..., a trusting through..., a surrendering again and again..., screaming loud..., and listening quietly. The emptying, i.e. the awareness of our powerlessness, is the focus, not an obstacle to be avoided.

Some of you may personally know of Killian Noe. She was a co-founder of Samaritan Inns in 1985, a drug and alcohol rehab treatment center. The intensity, the struggles, the unknowing profoundly pushed her to face her weaknesses (we might call them shadows). Listen to these words from Killian in her book, *Finding Our Way Home* (pp. 77-79).

So, hopefully you still have a card in front of you. I invite you to write on the back—examples of your real gifts, i.e. how you will change, what you'll experience—once you allow yourself to let go of an outcome. And once you are done, give this to someone next to you for him or her to hold you in prayerful thought this week.

In closing, I'd like to read a poem by David Wagner. He reminds us to look and listen on this journey. It's called *Getting There*. Prayerfully take it in.

Getting There

You take a final step and, look, suddenly
You're there. You've arrived
At the one place all your drudgery was aimed for:
This common ground
Where you stretch out, pressing your cheek to sandstone.

What did you want
To be? You'll remember soon. You feel like tinder
Under a burning glass,
A luminous point of change. The sky is pulsing
Against the cracked horizon,
Holding it firm till the arrival of stars
In time with your heartbeats.
Like wind etching rock, you've made a lasting impression
On the self you were
By having come all this way through all this welter
Under your own power,
Though your traces on a map would make an unpromising
Meandering lifeline.

What have you learned so far? You'll find out later,
Telling it haltingly
Like a dream, that lost traveler's dream
Under the last hill
Where through the night you'll take your time out of mind

To unburden yourself
Of elements along elementary paths
By the break of morning.

You've earned this worn-down, hard, incredible sight
Called Here and Now.
Now, what you make of it means everything,
Means starting over:
The life in your hands is neither here nor there
But getting there,
So you're standing again and breathing, beginning another
Journey without regret
Forever, being your own unpeaceable kingdom,
The end of endings.

~ David Wagoner ~

(In Broken Country)

Paradoxically, may we all "get there" by not trying to get there, in the name of Christ. Amen