

Running on Empty

Philippians 2:1-11, Matthew 16:21-27

Several ago, Norma and I took our grandson, Landon, for a road trip to Washington, D.C. After a couple of days in the nation's capital, we made a side trip to Baltimore to watch a Baltimore Orioles game. After the game, as we left to return to our motel in Washington, I noticed that the gas tank on our rental car was almost empty. We traveled miles and miles without finding a gas station. It was almost midnight, and I really worried about how Landon would deal with being stuck on the side of the road between a cow pasture and a tobacco farm in Southern Maryland... I knew the little guy was already homesick and already feeling some anxiety about being so far from home, in an unfamiliar setting. I didn't want to have to tell him we were stranded, out of gas, on a desolate highway at midnight. In my whole life, I've never prayed more fervently. The Lord heard my prayers and led us to a gas station, and Landon will never know how terrified his Poppy was during those long minutes on a dark highway coming back from Baltimore. And for the rest of the trip to DC, I topped off the tank every 50 or 60 miles. *I didn't want to be running on empty anymore.*

Emptiness terrifies us, doesn't it? The fear of being empty sends us off in a desperate search for something that will fill us up again. We don't like running on empty. And when we find something that promises to fill us up, we grasp it tightly. We cling to it, we hold on to it—all in the name of what we Americans like to call "*the pursuit of happiness.*" That way of dealing with life is deeply embedded in the American psyche. Deep in our hearts we're convinced that the secret of a good life is all about acquiring, possessing, and holding on to the things that will "fulfill us"—we hope will fill us full and keep us full. If there's one thing that scares us to death, it's *running on empty.*

But the God of the Bible seems to have quite a different take on emptiness. He's a God, after all, who creates *ex nihilo*—literally *out of nothing*. Genesis 1:1-2a: "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was without shape and empty...*" (NEB) *God created out of that emptiness*—indeed, out of NOTHING! You can't get any emptier than that... It all began with total emptiness, which provided the opportunity for an eruption of God's creative power. *Not from something but from nothing*—not from fullness but from emptiness, God creates the universe! In just the same way, when a runaway world needed nothing less than to be renewed, remade, recreated—redeemed—God in the person of his Son turned loose of all that was rightfully his. *He emptied himself, and out of that emptiness came a new creation.*

That is what lies at the heart of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. You know the familiar story of the Philippian church (largely told in Acts 16)— How Paul saw a vision of a “man” from Macedonia saying, “*Come over and help us,*” how he went at once and was arrested soon after he arrived, how he and his companion, Silas, were singing at midnight when an earthquake shook the prison and the Philippian jailer and his family all became Christians, how the “man” in Paul's vision turned out to be a woman named Lydia, whose house church supported Paul throughout his ministry.

Now, years later, from a Roman prison, Paul writes (in Philippians 2),
⁵ *You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had,*
⁶ *who though he existed in the form of God*
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
⁷ *but emptied himself*
by taking on the form of a slave,
by looking like other men,
and by sharing in human nature.
⁸ *He humbled himself,*
by becoming obedient to the point of death
—even death on a cross!
⁹ *As a result God highly exalted him*
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ *so that at the name of Jesus*
every knee will 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. (Philippians 2:1-11, NEB):

During a faculty meeting at Hendrix College long ago, one of my colleagues went on and on about all the ways the curriculum should be changed and how much better things would be if his ideas and pet projects were all put into effect. After a while, Dr. Francis Christie leaned over and muttered to me, “*He's just full of himself tonight.*” That phrase has stuck with me over the years. We're just *full of ourselves*, aren't we?

Full of ourselves...

I was a senior in high school when I read the writings of Ayn Rand for the first time. She's best known for epic novels articulating a vision of the heroic individual who dares to defy the establishment, who won't be controlled by peer pressure or social norms, who goes his own way and asserts himself against the tyranny of the majority. Her theme is radical individualism, a theme that's well summarized in the title of one of her less known books, *The Virtue of Selfishness*—revealingly subtitled, *A New Concept of Egoism*. Here was a best-selling author—an intellectual!—assuring me that selfishness isn't just o.k.: it's a virtue! Some of my most vivid memories of high school have to do with my habit of walking around with a paperback copy of one of Ayn Rand's books in my hand, just to make a statement—to prove that *I was an individualist—like everybody else in the class of 1965*.

We were just so full of ourselves...

Hear the wisdom of a Sufi proverb: "*We're all doing a life sentence in the prison of the self.*" Maybe my problem is not emptiness. My problem is that I'm *full of myself*, so there's no room for God, no room for you, no room for anyone or anything but me and my agenda. When I'm full of myself, I can't help believing that it really is all about me, because the central organizing principle of my life is...well, me. It's all about me. *A culture of narcissism, self-absorption, self-centeredness.*

We've created a mass market for publications with titles like *SELF* or *ME*—but you can spend a lot of time in the library or the newsstand without ever finding a magazine entitled, *SELF-SACRIFICE OR SELF-DENIAL*. *There's just not a market for it.* As they used to sing on Sesame Street, WE ALL LIVE IN A CAPITAL I... Even Christians seem to live by the motto, "*IT'S ALL ABOUT ME.*"

My favorite cartoon strip is *The Wizard of Id*, featuring the King and the Merlin, whose conversations are often revealing of something more than just funny. My favorite episode has the Merlin in his observatory gazing through his telescope at some distant galaxy. The King walks up and asks, *What are you looking for?* The Merlin answers: *I'm looking for the center of the universe.* To which the King responds with just one word: *Speaking...*

If I'm the center of the universe, then it makes sense that it's all about me and there's nothing more important than getting what I want. The fancy term for that is *radical individualism*.

Me myself alone: I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.

Although God is the fullness of being—totally self-sufficient, bubbling over with sheer reality. God is full—he chose to create the world out of emptiness. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty...* (Genesis 1.1-2a, NEB). Jesus was (and is) full of God: *"In him the fullness of the deity dwells bodily"* (Colossians 2.9). He was full—but he redeemed us by emptying himself. And we are created in the image of a God who sees emptiness not as a problem but as an opportunity. We Christians bear the name of One who was ready to empty himself for our sake, and what's true for him is true for us as well. So today I dare to proclaim to you that you will never know eternal life or joy or peace until you are ready to start running on empty—until at last you are *full of nothing but God*. Jesus emptied himself of all but love. And we will know real joy—not just euphoria, not mere pleasure, not what this world calls happiness—only when we dare to be empty. We will know the abiding joy that's a foretaste of heaven only when we too, by the power of his Spirit, are emptied of all but God.

Real Christianity is not about self-interest or self-discovery or self-fulfillment or self-esteem: it's all about self-sacrifice and self-surrender. But most American Christians have bought into the culture of narcissism, hook, line, and sinker. Our strategies for evangelism all too often begin and end with an appeal to self-interest. We tell people, in effect, *"Come to Jesus, and here's what you'll get out of it! You want peace of mind? You want happiness? You want to avoid the damnation of hell? You want a mansion in heaven? You want to be prosperous and financially secure? Well, then, just come to Jesus and you can have all of that!"* As Randy Travis used to sing, *"Jesus is on the main line; tell him what you want. Just call him up and tell him what you want..."* Even Christians seem to live by the slogans that mirror the radical self-centeredness of a fallen world: *What's in it for me? What am I going to get out of this?* We come to God for all the good things we think we can get out of him. We come to God ready to do some serious bartering. You might call it, *"The Art of the Deal."* God has something I want (eternal life, peace of mind). And I have something God wants (my faith, my obedience). So I come to God and say, in effect, *CAN WE MAKE A DEAL?*

God does want you to have peace and joy and abundance of life, but *as long as we are coming to him for what we think we can get out of him, we're not really coming to him at all*. We're trying to con God, even as we manipulate and exploit others. We're just trying to enlist God in service to our agenda, our "pursuit of happiness."

But that turns God into nothing more than a means to our ends. It's the same confusion about ends and means that poisons everything we touch. Even what we call love is often just another way of getting what we want out of somebody else. We say, *I love you*, but what we really mean is more like *I love the happiness that I think you'll bring me*. And then we take that same self-centered approach in our encounter with God. What we really want is not God but the good things we think we can get out of him. So we transform Christianity into one more strategy of selfishness. "*Just call him up and tell him what you want...*" But what does that have to do with the example of Jesus? He was not confused about ends and means. He didn't try to manipulate God or bargain with God to get what he wanted. On the night before he died for us, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus didn't try to bargain with God. He prayed, rather, "*Let not my will but yours be done in me.*" The very next day, at Calvary, while he hung on a cross for six long hours, Jesus was *not* asking, "*What's in this for me? What am I going to get out of it?*" When Jesus was crucified, he wasn't grasping or clinging. His arms were extended, his hands were wide open—open to God, open to sinners, open to the life that lies on the other side of the question, "*What's in it for me?*"

If following Jesus is all about falling in love with God and with all who are loved by God, you would have a hard time coming up with a more complete perversion of Christianity than to turn it into a self-centered pursuit of happiness. Yet that is what we've done in America over the last couple of centuries. When we talk about Jesus as our personal Savior, often we confuse the *personal* with the *private*. (To Father Rafael, the Russian Orthodox priest in Stupino, a few miles from Moscow, I once posed the question that people in the Bible Belt ask others many hundreds or thousands of times a day: "*Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?*" He found the question puzzling. He asked, "*Personal? You mean...like my tooth brush?*")

Our self-centered approach shows up in many of the songs we sing about Jesus. "*On the Jericho Road, there's room of just two,/ No more and no less: just Jesus and you.*" Then there's the national anthem of the Bible Belt: "*I come to the*

garden ALONE. And the joy we share as we tarry there NONE OTHER HAS EVER KNOWN.” None other! I’ve got Jesus all to myself!

Or in the immortal words of Tom T. Hall, “*Me and Jesus, we got a good thing going; me and Jesus we got it all worked out. We don’t need nobody to tell us what it’s all about.*” (It’s not even JESUS and me. It ‘s ME and Jesus. That says all you know about what our priorities really are.

But what if salvation isn’t about getting what you want but sharing in the life of God? To share in the life of a God whose name, whose nature, is Love (I John 4.7), don’t you need at least one other person to give your love to? Can you do compassion in an isolation booth, all by yourself? And, truth be told, aren’t we trying to turn love itself into just another strategy for getting what we want? But if the name of the game is compassion, how can you do that all by yourself?

In the 4th century of the Christian era, a young Christian we have come to know as Basil of Caesarea wrote a letter to the hermit monks sitting in their caves on the east side of the Nile River in Egypt, pursuing perfection alone, each in his own cave. Basil recounted the story of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and then commanding us to wash one another’s feet. Then he asked these earnest Christians who were seeking union with God all by themselves: *Whose feet will you wash?*

It turns out that being a Christian is not a solo act. A relationship to Christ puts us immediately in touch with all those who are in Christ. So the truth is that you never “come to the Garden alone.” A Russian Orthodox bishop once said to me: “*You can go to hell all by yourself if you want to, John...but we will go to heaven (if we go to heaven at all) together.*”

When I told Bonner Teeter, the senior pastor of the University UMC in Tulsa that I loved Jesus but was turned off by a lot of what I saw happening in the life of the Church, he just asked: “*Do you think John, that you can have Christ without his Body? Do you think you can have Christ without his Bride?*” (Three months later I became the pastor of two small churches in southern Oklahoma...)

But maybe somebody here today is still wondering, “*What’s in it for me?*” So let me tell you.

What’s in it for you—what’s in it for me and for all the world—is *getting beyond enslavement to that question...* What’s in it for you is freedom from your own self-centeredness. What’s in it for you is the joy that every inmate in *the Prison of the Self* seeks without finding. What’s in it for you, for all of us is the

grace of Jesus that is at work to liberate us the cruelest of all tyrants—the self-centered ego that we have been seduced into mistaking for our true selves.

During my 31 years at Hendrix College, I often heard students say, “*I’m trying to find myself.*” I never heard anyone say, “*I’m trying to lose myself in Something that’s bigger and nobler than I could ever by all by myself.*” But as long as what you are trying to find is your true self, the search itself guarantees that you’ll be disappointed.

C.S. Lewis goes to the heart of it all when he ends Mere Christianity with these inspired words: “*Your real, new self (which is Christ's and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him... Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.*”

So it’s not too late to begin this new life in Christ...*running on empty, waiting to be filled with nothing but God.*

That’s the Good News. That’s the Gospel.

For us today, this is the Word of the Lord.

So what is left to say? Just this:

Thanks be to God.

Hallelujah.

Amen.