

“The Gift of Emptiness”

February 25, 2018

Gifts of the Dark Wood series – 2nd Sunday in Lent

“The Christian life is not a constant high. I have my moments of deep discouragement. I have to go to God in prayer with tears in my eyes, and say, 'O God, forgive me,' or 'Help me.'” Can you guess who said those words? It was Rev. Billy Graham, who passed away at 99 this week.

Graham will be remembered for his preaching. He'll be remembered for the thousands of people who heard him and made a decision to follow Jesus. In every congregation I've served, including this one, there are people whose faith is stronger because of Billy Graham. For some, his preaching and invitation to accept God's love was a catalyst that changed their lives. Graham didn't save them; God did. But Billy Graham invited them to make a decision.

I've always viewed Graham as a person of integrity, humility, and deep commitment to the Gospel. But I've also been encouraged by his willingness to talk about his own transformation, his own uncertainties, and even speaking the truth that “the Christian life is not a constant high.” Graham's honesty about the struggles of faith reminds us that we are not alone. Those whom we look to as “saints” have dealt with uncertainty, discouragement, and perhaps even a feeling of emptiness.

As we planned and talked about this series, we wondered about the difference between uncertainty and emptiness. Last week, we said that we want clarity when we're uncertain, but that we can ultimately grow in trust. Emptiness seems like a darker, perhaps more difficult place. Maybe emptiness is uncertainty pushed to a limit. There's a loss of hope. Maybe we feel drained and alone, maybe even betrayed by the promise of a fulfilling life that doesn't feel fulfilled. We simply feel empty.

I thought about the stir caused by the publication of some of Mother Teresa's writing that shared her struggles. In 2007, *Come Be My Light* shared some of her personal correspondence. She wrote these words to a priest-friend in 1979: “Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.” I wonder if she felt like what this sculpture depicts:

SHOW SLIDE Emptiness of the Soul sculpture

How can we understand a feeling of emptiness as a gift? How can it possibly be a blessing in our lives? How can those moments or even seasons of emptiness help us to grow closer to God and be transformed?

Remember that we're exploring the real moments of life as a part of our faith journey rather than avoiding them. We're using the tradition of Christian mystics where the dark wood can be a place where we meet God in a new way when we bring all of ourselves to God.

It's difficult to embrace emptiness as a gift because we're obsessed with filling the emptiness in our lives. Consider for a moment: how many of us were uncomfortable with the one minute of silence? How many of us couldn't wait for it to be over?

Consider what happens if your calendar is open (empty) on a given day. Don't some of us want to fill it in with something? If someone says to us, "I feel like my life is empty," our response is to do what we can to help - to help fill the emptiness.

If we consider the image of the dark wood, emptiness might not be such a bad thing. Eric Elnes reminds us that there are clearings where we see more clearly. We might think of it as a "thin place" - a place where we can feel God's presence in a powerful way, especially as we sense our humanity and God's holiness. We have a "fear" of the Lord - not fear like being scared - but a sense of awestruck reverence for who God is and who we are. Proverbs 9:10 proclaims it:

¹⁰"The **fear of the LORD** is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (NIV)

¹⁰ **Respect and obey the Lord!** This is the beginning of wisdom. To have understanding, you must know the Holy God. (CEV)

God is holy, and we are human; and yet, we know that we're God's beloved and made in God's image. It's an interesting tension we find ourselves in.

Eric Elnes writes, "No amount of success, brilliance, or published works exempt you from insecurity and failure, even when you are walking squarely on your life's path." So how can we live without fear of our shortcomings? We won't ever be free of faults, but what would it be like to be free of our fear of them? Jesus had something to say about this to his disciples: *Whoever tries to preserve their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will preserve it.*

Elnes offers a helpful phrase: *moving from fear to flow*. That is, not allowing only fear to dictate our responses or attitudes, but also allowing our abilities and gifts to guide us. He uses the example of a frog jumping away from him, partly motivated by fear and instinct, but able to get away through the obstacles it faced because it used its ability - its flow.

Elnes makes the connection to how we live our faith. Are we only motivated by fear? Do we live with a fear of God not loving us because of how terrible we are or try to mask the struggles? Friends, the good news is that God doesn't love us because of who we are (or aren't). God loves us because of who God is.

Today we heard the account of Jesus crucified, mocked, taunted. It might seem early in Lent to focus on the crucifixion, but it's important to hear Jesus' cry of emptiness: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Those who heard Jesus probably knew that he was quoting Psalm 22.

Surely that's a cry of emptiness, of feeling alone, abandoned, even afraid. And it's important not only to hear it, but to respond. What if we were there? Would we do anything differently than the people who watched? The disciples who ran? Pilate who let it happen?

What if it happened now? Would it end any differently? Probably not. What the cross tells us is that God chooses "relationship over perfection" in Elnes' words. Billy Graham said, "God proved His love on the Cross. When Christ hung, and bled, and died, it was God saying to the world, 'I love you.'" We can despair over our shortcomings and imperfections, even our emptiness, but God calls us to let go of the fear we have and invite God into our lives.

All of this leads us to a place of deeper humility where we understand who we are in relationship to God. God wants us to come to him for relationship - not because we're perfect and have it all figured out - but because we don't! We can trust in God's love for us and follow God into the future. We can embrace our full humanity and live into it with God's presence.

The cross reminds us of God's love, but it also reminds us that even in Jesus' emptiness - in his cry out to God - Jesus was found. As difficult as it is for us to embrace, death offers an opportunity for new life to emerge. God heard Jesus, and God offered new life beyond the pain of emptiness.

Maybe you've had those times of emptiness, or maybe you're in a season of it now. Perhaps you've cried out to God with words of despair or anger. God hears us and offers new life beyond the pain of emptiness.

I invite you to watch this video called "Empty." **SHOW** video
When we see emptiness, God sees an opportunity to offer fullness of new life. We can be confident that God meets us in times of emptiness - that emptiness can be a moment and season when God is filling us with new life and new hope.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE - *Come and Rest*