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**“Running on Empty”
A sermon by Cheryl Henry**

7th Sunday of Easter (Year B)

May 13, 2018

Luke 6:43-45, Acts 1:6-11, Philippians 2:1-13

I want to tell you an old story

maybe you've heard it or lived it before

-- only partly biblical, but biblical enough

and especially appropriate today I think since

our area colleges and universities are graduating this weekend

and all our schools are soon wrapping up the school year.

It goes like this:

Jesus takes his disciples up a mountain
and begins to teach them:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek,

Blessed are they that mourn.

Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed are they who thirst for justice.

Blessed are you when you suffer.

Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven."

Then, Simon Peter said, "Do we have to write this down?"
And, Andrew said, "Are we supposed to know this?"
And, James said, "Will it be on the test?"
And, Phillip said, "I don't have any paper."
And, Bartholomew said, "The other disciples
didn't have to learn this."
And, Matthew said, "Can I go to the bathroom?"
And, Judas said, "What does this have to do with real life?"
Then, one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see
Jesus' lesson plan and inquired of Jesus: "Where is your
anticipatory set of objectives in the cognitive domain?"
And Jesus wept.

Anyone ever been in that classroom?

In today's scripture lesson

Paul is dealing with a congregation

-- very dear to him --

maybe the dearest of all the congregations

we know him to have pastored --

but dear as they are,

these Christians

like the disciples before them in the story I just told

have faith lessons that they are resisting to learn.

Important, basic lessons.

Now Paul, like a mom -- it's mother's day, so we'll say like a mom! -

who one day eyes her child's

surly entitlement to almost everything,

and realizes that though she has faithfully made the kid

write his/her thank you letters,

some basic understandings about thankfulness

that haven't seeped in yet.

Paul sees that his dear Philippians

still have not truly gotten some basic Christian virtues

that he had hoped he had taught them;

that he hoped they had taken in.

And so, like a good parent,
like a good pastor,
Paul decides in his writing
to this dear congregation,
to take a positive approach.

Always good to start there, right?

And so he says,
If there is any encouragement in Christ
- well, there *is OR SHOULD be encouragement in Christ!*
If there is any consolation from love
- again, *there is OR SHOULD be consolation from love, right?*
If there is any sharing in the Spirit
If there is any compassion and sympathy-
and certainly we know (wink, wink)
that for us as Christians there should be sharing in the Spirit,
compassion, sympathy!

Then make my joy complete!
Make daddy happy . .
Be of the same mind
(hmmm . . . are there some in the Philippian community
who are not of the same mind?)
do not be selfish, Paul says
(some one's being selfish, I think)
be humble considering others as better than yourselves.
Let each of you look not to your *own* interests,
but to the interest of *others*.

Are you hearing now?
The negative message lining within the positive?

Evidently, some of the Philippians are a bit full of themselves
(isn't that really what selfishness is?)
and some are especially prideful of themselves

and all that selfishness and pride is leading to
a certain lack of compassion and sympathy for others.

So, these are the issues.
But how to right the ship?

Well, choir you would like this,
for Paul decides that what these Philippians
need most is a song!

And in verses 6-11 Paul sings the Philippian congregation a little ditty.
A hymn he knows that they all knew.
It isn't a hymn Paul made up himself
but rather, one that community probably made up.
And probably sang most every Sunday in worship.

A hymn that reminded them,
of Jesus.
Of what he was like.
What he was all about.
So that in remembering Jesus.
They might also remember
who they are as Jesus' disciples
and what they are suppose be like.

Paul sings this little hymn
and in it he
reminds the Philippians
that Christ Jesus -- He who though he was God,
came to the conclusion
that being God
was not a thing to be exploited;
to be taken advantage of.
That merely being God isn't
the ultimate goal of God even!

And so God empties God's self.

The One who was first, for a time,
put aside being first.

The One who was perfect,
for a time put aside,
being perfect.

The very One who was the King of all things,
infinite, unlimited, unbounded, free,
for a time,
became, of all things!
a slave;
a finite, bounded, unfree
baby, and then child,
and finally adult -- human being
who died;
was killed actually and nailed to a cross.

Now that's a lot to take in right there.
A lot to get our heads around.

For Paul wants us to understand
that Jesus was not a god like Zeus from Greek and Roman mythology
who, for kicks, because he's bored or needs a laugh or something, comes down
to earth looking like a human being for a day or two
to mingle with and maybe play a few tricks on the homosapiens.¹
Or if he is feeling benevolent,
to bless some especially favored human
with a miracle or two.

No!

Paul is telling us something much, much more radical.
He is saying that Jesus comes to earth
because something in God does not want to be the sort of God
who does not share in the experiences of his creation.
Something in the blessed Trinity's relationship to itself
drives God to share God's self deeper with God's creation.

¹ Concept from 9/25/17 Scott Hoezee on the "Excellence in Preaching" website for this passage.

Something about the love that God wants
to love us with,
in order for it to truly save us;
in order for it to truly be the balm that will heal us;
must take on sacrifice, suffering, death
and even a cross.

Now this is radical.

This is something that takes a life time to understand
and so maybe we shouldn't be so hard
on our Philippian brothers and sisters.

You see friends, our God, our a Savior
is downwardly mobile!

The one who saves us,
is the one who does not seek to save himself.
He who delivers us
first delivers himself over to us.

He who is most free
chooses to be obedient
even to the point of death -
even death on a cross.

These profound paradoxes of Christ's love - if we can grasp them -
take our breath away.

Their mystery confounds our minds
and yet are so compellingly beautiful to our souls.

No wonder they are communicated best in songs.

*When I was sinking down, sinking down
sinking down, when I was sinking down, sinking down,
when I was sinking down, beneath God's righteous frown,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul.
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul.*

Christ laid aside his crown for my soul.

When you sing it that way,
It's not so hard to grasp is it?

You know,
as Americans (and probably all people on earth)
we love to tell each other rags-to-riches stories.

We love stories of how Abraham Lincoln
who educated himself in a log cabin
became President of the United States of America.
Or how Oprah Winfrey
born in poverty in rural Mississippi
became the "Queen of all media."²

But wonderful as those stories are -- and they are wonderful --
this story of Jesus Christ,
our Savior who saves us,
is such a different story from those.
It is not a rags-to-riches tale,
but a riches-to-rags story³
Humbling and awe-inspiring.

This humility of Christ
who came from everything to nothing,
from heaven to be on earth,
who emptied himself
to be with disciples (students?) like us.
Like us!
Students who
who sit in his presence daily
and have the audacity to wonder.
Who have the audacity to wonder
if we should even write down what he is teaching us.

² Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oprah_Winfrey

³ Concept from 9/25/17 Scott Hoezee on the "Excellence in Preaching" website for this passage.

Who dare to act as if we aren't sure
if what he is teaching us is worth knowing at all.
Who seem to care only if we pass "the test"
(wink, wink - get into heaven)
and calculate so shrewdly
how many classes can we cut
how many times can we show up
without paper or pencil or little energy for learning
all the while
complaining that other disciples don't have to learn these things

Friends, I don't know about you,
when I look at myself I see
how I may not have nailed Jesus to the cross,
but I do see how I, like those Philippians of old,
have niggled and wiggled and self-justified myself
out of learning anything at all from Jesus.
And I see how we, his closest students . . .
the very ones he called friends, betray him . . .
death by a thousand paper cuts, as they say.

And I think we have to ask ourselves,
how long before we lay aside our pride
and learn the humility that Christ taught?

William Law once said
that humility is:

a sane, sober, honest recognition that we're all pretty much the same. We all have things we do well and things we do not do so well; we all have gifts in some areas but not in others. Humility is simply the rational recognition of these common-sense facts.

Law then adds this about humility's opposite - pride:

Pride, on the other hand, is irrational—it's insane to think you're the center of the universe, crazy to believe that you could get along just fine without

*other people. It's sick to think that everyone should pay attention to you in a way that you yourself never pay attention to others.*⁴

Friends,

Paul is telling us
God understood
that being the center of the universe,
unless it serves love,
isn't a goal worth shooting for.

Paul is telling us
that our's is a Savior who knew
that being the top-of-the-heap would never be meaningful
unless one also understood being the bottom-of-the-heap.

Paul is telling us
that the Spirit teaches us that being the best is useless
unless it is placed in God's hands
and that running on empty isn't empty at all.

And if God knows, then what are we waiting for?

For Jesus to leave us?

Well,
funny thought that one,
because - liturgically anyways -
as of Thursday of this week,
we are in Ascension time!

Now Kathy Parkins and Beth Brockman
have both been all over me about Ascension this week!

Beth tells me that Jesus' Ascension
even makes her a little sad.
Sad because it marks the time in our liturgical calendar
when we actually turn away from remembering
the emptied Christ - the human Jesus

⁴ From 9/25/17 Scott Hoezee on the "Excellence in Preaching" website for this passage.

and turn toward the exalted Christ in heaven.

In other words, every year beginning with Christmas
and through the Ascension
the liturgical year that we follow emphasizes the earthly Christ.
We talk about Jesus
being born a baby,
about his being a child in the temple.
about his baptism.
His preaching his first sermon in Nazareth.
His healing and miracles.
His week of passion. His death. And yes!
most joyous of all, his resurrection back here on earth.

With Jesus' Ascension and the 7th Sunday of Easter we draw to an end
focusing on Jesus' human story.

From here on out until next Christmas, liturgically speaking,
it's the church and the Holy Spirit coming,
and Christ sitted at the right-hand of God sort of stuff.

And if you realize this then maybe it does leave you
a bit wistfully staring up to heaven at this time of year;
it's a little sad to see the human Christ go.

But Paul, as gently as he can
(and he can only be so gentle - he is Paul after all!)
in today's passage, directs our attention back to an earth
where Jesus' hands and feet are now known in our own.
It's our turn now.

Our turn to have the same mind as Jesus did.
Our turn to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling.

Our turn to practice our own life's
riches to rags movement - however the Spirit shows us that is.

It is our turn, out of love, in response to the grace of God's love,
to give our lives over to God as God did to us.

This week I heard a prayer that helped me with that.
It's the Covenant Prayer from the Wesleyan Tradition
and I'd like to say it for you:

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
exalted for you, or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.⁵

It is our turn, sisters, brother, kin all.
Our turn to run on empty for a while.
To empty ourselves
and to share ourselves.
Our turn to show up as human as Jesus dared to be.

It is time friends.
Time and past time, Paul reminds us.
To sharpen our pencils.
To find our paper or our computers -
perhaps most importantly our hearts --
and start writing down the lessons.
Time to start taking our Jesus notes
not because we have to, or should, or anyone is making us,
but because we can; because we are privileged to be Jesus' disciples;

⁵ This is the modern version of this prayer. Found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesley_Covenant_Prayer

Christ's students.

Because the lessons he taught and the love he showed
are for real life.

Our real life - together.

The only real life that is life!

The only life that conquers death.

May we exalt that life and no other.

May we gladly find our

place among those

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

whose knee rejoices to bend,

whose tongue is freed to confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Those who are privileged know that God is at work in us,
enabling us both to will and to work
for Christ's good pleasure.

And those are the anticipatory set objectives
in the cognitive domain . . .
and the spiritual domain . . .
and every domain we know of. Amen.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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