

the empty glass

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens/Homily for October 1, 2017

Do you see the glass as half-full, or half empty? The question has particular meaning these days, and on this Sunday. The question resonates in these times, when so much is uncertain. When our anxiety levels rise we can be drawn towards pessimism, and towards the self-centered thinking that does such harm to our world. The question resonates on *this* Sunday, when we draw this season of stewardship, our celebration of generosity and discipleship, to a joyful close: on this Sunday, how can we *not* see the glass for its fullness, as a reflection of the abundance of God?

You probably see which way I'm leaning on the great question of the glass. We look at it sitting there, and we realize that on some days we will see it as half empty, yet we know that a more faithful perspective leads us to see what is there, and what is possible.

But let's not get too lost in staring at that glass. You know why? I think that the great mystics of our tradition, and on some days I would even place Paul in that category, would tell us this: *We're looking at the wrong glass!* All this thought about half full and half empty, as much as we might lean towards optimism, keeps us tethered to a mindset that pales in the light of the Gospel. No, in Paul's estimation, there are no half measures here. The glass – and this tells us something about the incredible self-giving nature of God – isn't half-*anything*. The glass is completely...

Empty. If you're looking at a half-empty glass and trying to find the abundance of God, you are looking at the wrong vessel. The nature of God is to empty himself completely into the world, that we might receive that grace, and then lavish it upon others. This is an abundant and audacious emptiness, and Paul uses a word here that we need to know: *kenosis. Self-emptying.* Pouring myself out, to become remade with the breath of God.

Paul is writing to the new believers in Philippi, who struggled to sort through conflict and competing claims of leadership. *Make my joy complete*, he wrote. *Be of the same mind, having the same love, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*

Paul isn't giving them the tools to figure out who is right and who is wrong; Paul is encouraging them to completely change their mindset. Unless they do, they will remain forever rooted in a self-centered world. Not only will the conflict remain, but they will fall far short of the fullness of relationship with Jesus. *Let each of you*

look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

This is a far more radical idea than it sounds like at first. This is not a simple “try to think like Jesus.” This is not “What would Jesus do?” Paul is not asking them to look at the same half-empty glass and learn to see it as half full. Taking on the mind of Christ means looking at another glass entirely. Paul then quotes a hymn that the Philippian would have known to say what taking on the mind of Christ really means.

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Jesus emptied himself. Kenosis: self-emptying. Paul gives us a window not just into Jesus the man, but Christ, the second person of the Trinity. Co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, yet in a moment in time chose to empty himself and take on human form. When Jesus came to walk among us, this was first and foremost an act of divine self-emptying. And when Jesus offered himself up to death on a cross, this, too was an act of self-giving, a kenotic act, in which the vessel that held Jesus’ life was violently shattered, pouring out his life and breath onto the ground below. *Being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.* To that favorite local hymn, Paul likely added the phrase *even death on a cross.*

In God’s abundant acts of self-emptying, there are no half measures. That’s the meaning of the word anyway, isn’t it? There’s really no such thing as “half empty”...it’s either empty or it isn’t! And that means *we* mustn’t settle for half measures ourselves...we will find joy when we empty ourselves, as we learn to live not for ourselves but for others, and for God.

To me, this is one the most powerful phrases in all of scripture. It speaks to my heart and does something to me every time I read it. Whenever I read or hear of Jesus “emptying himself,” I feel my blood pressure go down a bit. My breath gets just a bit deeper, and I feel a sense of peace all throughout my body. I experience self-emptying as a beautiful and healing experience, as if Jesus is saying to me that I can let go all the burdens and accretions that my soul has picked up. And it’s instantaneous, as the act of emptying something tends to be. Kenosis is not an endurance run: it’s an immediate abandonment of self to make room for grace. It is a lavish emptiness.

Paul wrote these words because he knew the Philippians needed them. But Paul needed them too: he wrote this letter during one of his periods of imprisonment, and some scholars suggest that Paul’s use of such evocative poetry came from his

own pain, that he needed a reminder that his own sacrifice connected him to the mind of Christ. And note that when he asks that his own joy be made complete, it doesn't come from regaining his freedom. It comes when his children in faith – the Philippians – choose to take on the mind of Christ Jesus, to live the life of bold, self-emptying love.

William Greenway writes that “Even as Paul endures imprisonment and faces execution, he is sustained by this kenotic participation. It is a love that burns with desire for the flourishing of others, a love whose joy can be made complete only when all are included. Paul burns with a joy and love that he desperately wants the Philippians to share.”ⁱ

We are healed when we empty ourselves, lavishly, and joyfully. Greenway continues, “When concern for others takes one utterly beyond self-interest, beyond obsession with achievements, and self-obsessing guilt over failures, beyond self, then one receives the comfort as an Easter ‘yes’ so overwhelming, unconditional, undeniable, and absolute that it is experienced as unending and forever – a yes more potent and enduring than any imaginable no.”ⁱⁱ

Our stewardship and generosity will reflect the glory of this overwhelming “yes:” there are no half-measures in kenosis, and there is no way to be halfway generous. Our thanksgiving and gratitude for God's self-emptying can only be a complete and wholehearted yes to God, and that means pouring ourselves out as Jesus did.

Our responses to the pain in our world, or whatever might be surfacing in our families or our communities, will start at the same place if we are being faithful. We cannot see another's pain if we are obsessed with ourselves; we cannot find the completeness of Joy if we choose to redefine the witness of another in terms that soothe our own feelings. It was true of the Phillipians; it is true of us. Either we empty ourselves, and make room for the wild movement of the Holy Spirit, or we hold on to what we've got and what we know, and forever try to turn a half-empty glass of water into an infinite spring of the water of life. But it won't go there. We're looking at the wrong glass.

Instead, as followers of Jesus, we take on the *mind* of Christ. We see the world not for what we might draw from it, but what we can pour out upon it. We see our lives not as vessels for consumption and accumulation, but as channels of grace and love, as conduits of the infinite gifts of God. We can give thanks for the gifts of God, and then turn our cups upside down, pouring ourselves out in a holy act of self-emptying love.

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Year A, Proper 21, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.*

ⁱ William Greenway, *Feasting on the Word*, David Bartell & Barbara Brown Taylor, editors.
Year A, Volume 4.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*