

EMPTY

PHILIPPIANS 2: 5-11

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY – MARCH 28, 2010

UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHICAGO – Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

In February 1854 Fyodor Dostoevsky—just released from the prison camp, but still living under legal restriction in the military settlement at Semipalatinsk—wrote to Natalya Fonvizina, who had given him the copy of the New Testament which he had used in prison, a statement of personal faith that has continued to challenge and baffle ever since. He describes himself as “a child of unbelief and doubt” and says that he expects to remain so until his death. He speaks of the burning *desire* to believe and its cost to him; and perhaps most famously, he claims that “if someone were to prove to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it was really the case that the truth lay outside Christ, then I should choose to stay with Christ rather than with the truth.”

Dostoevsky expresses what a number of people in this congregation know—a profession of faith that is at best poignant testimony to a nostalgia for impossible certainty, a nostalgia expressed by a bare irrational insistence on a *choice* to believe. Dostoevsky knew what we also know: that there is no possible way of supporting Christian conviction by argument. Religious conviction—given the kind of world we live in—can only be an obstinate self-assertion by living out our faith.

The Epistle text assigned for Passion/Palm Sunday echoes Dostoevsky’s quest for certainty. Paul’s famous “Christ hymn “ offers a V-shaped piece of poetry in which the apostle maps the coming to earth of Jesus Christ, his hard hit at the rock bottom of his death, and God’s raising Him again so that all creation sees who He is (and has been all along). For the full details of Jesus’ arrest, arraignment, torture and death, see the Gospel text. For the mind of Christ—the attitude that determined his actions every day of his life—including the last—hear Paul’s hymn.

The first half of the passage is full of verbs (Jesus emptied himself, took the form of a slave, humbled himself, became obedient). These were not spontaneous actions on Jesus’ part. They all arose from the mind of Christ—the way he saw himself in relationship to God and the world. They meant a great emptying of the ego. In the second half of the passage, Jesus does nothing. The verbs all belong to God.

If you want to make sense of Holy Week and why Jesus died, you can do no better than these seven verses from Philippians. He “emptied himself,” he “took the form of a slave.” He was “born in human likeness,” he “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.” And it’s about us. “Let the same mind be in you,” Paul declares. We must empty ourselves of our pretenses and pride and predilections to judge others .

Sooner or later we too will be called to be obedient to death. That's a fact that we ignore at our peril. And no matter how sedulously the funeral industry tries to hide the fact of death from us, each of us, every one of us will die.

In the meantime we are as free as Jesus to decide how we will spend our lives: on self-protection or self-giving, on saving ourselves or on giving ourselves away, on holding tight to what we have or letting go so that our blessings are shared. When we become obedient, then God takes over and provides the verbs of confession and salvation and new life.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible there is a space between verse 8 and verse 9—between Jesus' death and God's exalting of Him. Then comes Paul's "therefore," the most compelling word in the narrative. Until we die to our past, there can be no therefore.

We have witnessed a form of "therefore" this week when the Health Care Reform bill was finally passed. We have come a long way but we still have farther to go. The passing of the bill has not only infuriated the Tea Party folks and the right-wing Republicans but it has led some of them to violent and racist extremes. When Congressman John Lewis, a hero of the Civil Rights movement who was honored five years ago by our own Protestants for the Common Good with the William Sloan Coffin Award for social justice, was called a "nigger" last Sunday night as he walked toward the House chambers of the capitol and Congressman Emmanuel Cleaver, a Methodist minister and former mayor of Kansas City was spit on, the process reached the lowest of lows. Two other leaders have been vilified also: Representative Barney Frank (a gay man from Massachusetts) and Rep. Anthony Weiner, a Jew.

What makes the Tea Party movement doubly evil is that so much of the violence and hate is being perpetrated by people who call themselves Christian. A Quinnipac University poll released on Wednesday took a look at the Tea Party members and found them to be just as anachronistic to the direction of the country as the Republican Party. They are disproportionately white, evangelical Christians and "less educated. . . than the average Joe and Jane Six-Pack."

A jewelry store out in Naperville is selling a Republican watch. It doesn't tell time. It just wrings its hands.

What is the "mind of Christ"? What does God require of us? These, dear friends, are not rhetorical questions.

We have to die to the old before we can embrace the new. The problem with too many churches is that they cling to the old so tightly that they die not an obedient death but a demise of apathy. G. A. Studdert-Kennedy portrayed us powerfully in his poem, "Indifference":

When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged Him on a tree.

They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary.

They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep.

For those were crude and cruel days and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Hyde Park, we simply passed Him by,

We never hurt a hair of Him, we only let Him die;

For we have grown more tender, and we would not give Him pain.

We only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

And still it rained the winter rain that drenched Him through and through.

The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,

And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

We live so much of our lives in a closed fashion: closed to each other, closed to the possibilities God puts before us, closed to the reality of our own suffering. Since a number of you were probably not here when I quoted Bill Coffin several weeks ago, I will hazard his wise words again: "Repression is to humans what instinct is to other animals." But repression of our feelings extorts a price: repressed sadness can come out as anger or fear; repressed anger can emerge as manipulation of others; repressed desire can return as pursuit of evil.

The miracle of Jesus' life was that he put everything in God's hands and became obedient to God's will—even unto suffering and death.

Christians must come to terms with the crucifixion, says Barbara Brown Taylor. God's silence on Good Friday—God's failure to step in and end the horror—only seems to underscore the church's traditional belief that God "willed" for Jesus to die. The real question is not, "Did God will Jesus to die?" says Taylor, but "What exactly did God will?" What God willed was not that Jesus should die, but that Jesus should pursue utter fidelity to the ways and will of God. It was the utter fidelity of Jesus' life to whom and what God called him to be and do that led to his death. It was Jesus' fidelity to God's way of being in the world that got him killed: his refusal to be other than what he was, his refusal to disclaim his identity and his role.

Jesus could have done otherwise. When questioned by Pilate, he could have disclaimed his identity—as his friend Peter did not once but three times: "I am not." So Peter lived and Jesus died. This is the difference between "I am" and "I am not." Jesus death was God's will only indirectly—as the consequence of his faithful life.

As disciples of the Man from Nazareth, you and I are called to live with fidelity to the will and ways of God. There are two kinds of suffering: the kind that should be resisted and the kind that results from living with integrity. The latter kind must be endured while we fight against the unjust kind of suffering that victims suffer at the hands of people and social systems that abuse them.

That wonderful Irish-Catholic undertaker/poet/essayist/and now novelist from Milford, Michigan, Thomas Lynch has written a book, *Apparition and Late Fictions*. I recommend his books. He's one of our most honest writers and one of the most authentically Christian—without ramming his faith down your throat or trying to convince you through soporific little illustrations—of anyone I know. In one of his pieces in *Bodies in Motion and At Rest*, he talks about living as a recovering alcoholic. "What I've learned from my sobriety, from the men and women who keep me sober, is how to pray. Blind drunks who get sober get a kind of blind faith—not so much a vision of who God is, but who God isn't, namely me."

Mr. Lynch's three stages of prayer speak to most of us. "When I was a child all of my prayers sounded like 'Gimme, Gimme.' I wanted a Jerry Mahoney puppet, to fly like Superman, and for my others and sisters to be adopted by other kindly parents and leave me and my mother and father alone. I got none of these things. These prayers were never answered."

Later when he was a young man, his prayers would always begin with "Show me, Lord." "I wanted a sign. I wanted God to prove Himself or Herself or Itself to me." He was a typical youth, full of outrage and arrogance and bravado. Nothing ever happened. "The proofs I prayed for never appeared. None of these prayers were ever answered."

For years, twenty of them anyway, as a new husband, a new funeral director, a new parent, as a social drinker and a working poet, Tom Lynch would pray, albeit infrequently. "Why me, God? The more I drank, the more I prayed it. Why do I have to work harder, longer, for less thanks or wages?...And when my inventory of 'Why me's' was exhausted, I would ask on behalf of my fellow man. Why did cars crash, planes fall out of the sky, bad things happen to good people? Why, if Anyone's in charge, did children die? Or folks go homeless?...Why wasn't God listening? I wanted to know. And before I'd agree to step one foot in heaven, I had a list of things I wanted explanations for.

"There's a reason we are given two ears and one mouth."

Someone finally told him that he should just say, "Thanks," and all that his prayers should begin that way and never stray far from the notion that life was a gift to be grateful for. So he began giving thanks for his family, for the blessing of his household and for his children. Then the daylight and the nightfall and the weather. Then the kindness you see in others, their foibles and their tender mercies. "I could even be grateful for my ex-wife, the tax-man, the gobshites

who run the world and ruin everything. The more I mouthed my thanks for them, the less they bothered me.”

Paul the apostle sings this Christological hymn which we read every Palm Sunday. The mind of Christ to which he calls us means that the selfish eye, the pompous mind, the ear hungry for compliments and the mouth that speaks none, the heart that has little room for others, and the hand that serves only the self are not only not Christlike but a denial of the faith. We are reminded again of the events of Holy Week—acclaim turned to betrayal, teachings summed up, a last supper among friends that institutes one of the central sacraments of our faith, questions asked and death defied.

Say, “Thank you.” Every day, every time you just say “Thanks,” you get the answer before the darkness comes. God’s says, “You’re welcome.”