

Running on Empty
Philippians 2:3-11, Matthew 21:1-11
March 16, 2008

Last week as I was driving around town on a couple of errands, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a red light on my dashboard. It said “Check gauge”, and when I looked closer, I realized I was driving on little more than fumes. I’ve never had the misfortune to actually run out of gas, but I have to admit the little light has blinked before my eyes on a few other occasions, fortunately always within close distance of a gas station.. This time it took 16.3 gallons to fill up – one gallon short of empty. Driving on empty is not something I’d recommend, and I would have felt really foolish if I had run out of gas only a few feet short of the pump, having drained every last drop of fuel in the tank.

Fullness is generally better than emptiness, whether it’s a gas tank, a bank account, a dinner plate, a theater, yes, even a sanctuary on Sunday mornings! We enjoy the ocean more at high tide when it is full, than at low tide when the water has receded far away; lovers appreciate the full moon much more than the new moon; we characterize an optimist as a person who sees his glass “half full” as opposed to the pessimist who’s glass is always “half empty.” We even have a hymn, #641 to be exact, called “Fill my cup Lord.” Fullness is associated with happiness, with success, with power, with accomplishment.

If you think about that first Palm Sunday and the two parades that were occurring in Jerusalem, the Roman Army’s march into Jerusalem for the high holy days of Passover was an exercise in demonstrating fullness – Pilate perhaps standing proudly in a chariot, the symbol of war and conquest; generals, their chests full of medals, leading battle-scarred soldiers; the air, full of military banners, waving in the breeze, towering over the marching troops; and crowds, full of awe or fear, cheering the power and the glory of Roman might. Pilate probably looks forward to a week of wining and dining in Jerusalem; if he keeps a lid on things, his future looks bright; there might even be a promotion in store for him. And the Roman general dreams of his name enshrined in the annals of the Roman Senate and his name added to the list of the heroes of the Empire.

And then, over on the other side of town, here comes Jesus, riding on a donkey and surrounded by his rag-tag band of former fishermen, peasants and a tax collector. His followers don’t wave flags; they wave what they have, palm fronds cut from trees; and they shout “hosanna” and quote from the psalms, trying to see glimpses of power, glimpses of the promised messiah, trying to see glimpses of the fullness of time, in this humble man approaching in such a humble manner. While Pilate is looking over the wine list, Jesus is planning his last meal. While the Roman general dreams of his name in lights, Jesus anticipates his name, written as a joke, on a crude sign nailed above a cross.

In short, where Pilate and the Roman General were full of themselves, pleased with their upward mobility, Jesus has emptied himself of all ambition and pride to enter the city where his enemies hold all the power.

Sometimes, however, fullness isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. For the last several weeks some of us have been gathering on Wednesday evenings to discuss Phillip Yancy’s book *Soul Survivor* in which he writes about 13 people who have influenced his journey of faith. Last Wednesday we considered Henri Nouwen, who Yancey says was one of the first persons to use the phrase “downward mobility,” writing in 1981 against “the uncontrolled drive for prestige, power, and ambition,” that drive to succeed, to be victorious over rivals, and reap big rewards. And along side all of the markers of success in commerce and industry, there are the encouragements of various spiritual gurus who promise us wealth, health and success if we follow the laws they have discovered, some even promising that God wants us to be rich and

famous. Nouwen said to the contrary, “The great paradox which Scripture reveals to us is that real and total freedom can only be found through downward mobility. The Word of God came down to us and lived among us as a slave. The divine way is indeed the downward way.”¹

Nouwen’s scriptural basis for his assertion comes from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, the passage Chris read for us earlier. Paul knew that ambition and self-centeredness is the cause of much pain and the source of conflict. Thus he tells his friends in Philippi to look to the interests of each other, rather than to their own, using as the best example for them -- Jesus himself. Some think that these words were taken from a hymn that was already being sung in the early Christian church, praising at Jesus’ willingness to “empty” himself of all heavenly power and to enter into human life not as a person of power or nobility, but as a servant or slave, humbling himself in obedience to God, even when that obedience led to his death.

Now, it would be easy for us to think, but also wrong for us to think, that Jesus could do all of that because he knew everything would turn out all right, that he knew the second stanza of the Christ Hymn before it was even written: “Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.” But if that were so, then Jesus would be guilty of self-aggrandizement on the same, or even greater scale than the Roman general and Pontius Pilate. And the lesson we would learn is “Humble yourself now and eventually you will be number one.” Thinking like this turns this hymn into a strategy for advancement and turns the gospel of Christ into advice on how to win room at the top. “Last now, first later!”

But if we read the gospel story closely, those last chapters which recount in sometimes excruciating detail Jesus’ last days, his betrayal, his arrest, his trial, his torture, his crucifixion, it must become clear to any but the most devoted prosperity gospel advocate, that Jesus emptied himself, served, and died—without guarantee or promise of reward and at the cross, the path to advancement was officially closed; the door was locked; the obedient servant met a bitter end. Fred Craddock writes, “The grave of Christ was a cave, not a tunnel. Christ acted in our behalf without view of gain. That is precisely what God has exalted and vindicated: self-denying service for others to the point of death with no claim of return, no eye upon reward.”²

One of those who emptied himself and was one of Christ’s greatest followers, if not one of his believers, was Mohandas Ghandi, called “Mahatma – the great soul -- another person we’ve been talking about on Wednesday evenings. Yancy writes of him, “as he immersed himself in the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, he became convinced that the humility of a servant is the one posture required by God.”³ Toward that end, when he set up his first commune he took on “the most defiling act possible for a Hindu, cleaning the latrines of the Untouchables.”⁴

The difficulty of this decision was dramatized in Richard Attenborough’s movie “Gandhi,” when Gandhi assigns his wife to latrine duty, arguing with her that the two of them must set the example for other members of the ashram. His wife, a high caste Indian woman, must empty herself of her old notions of what makes a person important and worthwhile. She reluctantly submits when Gandhi uncharacteristically lashes out at her in anger, telling her she must leave him if she will not do what he says, but then he immediately realizes that he too must empty himself of his cultural assumption that men have the right to tell women what to do. Gandhi spent his life in self-giving, not expecting any reward, and indeed, being assassinated by a Hindu fanatic who resented what he saw as Gandhi’s betrayal of his nation.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. It is characteristic of us to want to jump from the celebration of this day to the celebration of next Sunday, the celebration of resurrection and new life, and by all means possible to avoid the ugliness of the intervening days. We want to be joyful Christians; in fact, we’re encouraged to be joyful. And of course, “astonishment and joy are what our faith finally point to.” Even Paul, who can be pretty gloomy

sometimes, writes later in Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice” (Phi. 4:4).

But, Frederick Buechner, another author we discussed last Wednesday, says in his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* that “‘rejoice’ is the last word and can be spoken only after the first word. The sheltering word can be spoken only after the word that leaves us without a roof over our heads, the answering word only after the word it answers.”⁵ In such a way, the gospel is always tragedy before it is comedy. Tragedy Buechner says is inevitable in life – “given the vulnerability of [humankind] and the pitiless storm of the world, tragedy is bound to happen. Given the sinfulness of [humanity] and the temptation of the world to sin, tragedy is bound to happen. . . . The tragic is inevitable. The comic is unforeseeable.”⁶

And so this week, don’t rush to the comedy – don’t rush to the happy ending – don’t rush to the place where Mary Magdalene hears Jesus call her name and her heart leaps, as she realizes he’s alive. Sit with her awhile this week; sit with her and the other women who wait at the cross, watching the best thing that ever happened in their lives suffer and die before their very eyes. Stay with the disciples as the sneak away one at a time, back to the old life because the dream of a different future has died with their leader. Because if you don’t understand what it feels like to run on empty, then you cannot begin to appreciate what it feels like to be filled to overflowing.

¹ Henri Nouwen quoted in Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 311.

² Fred Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 42.

³ Philip Yancey, p. 157.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1977), p. 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.