

Philippians 2:5-11
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“The Power of Spiritual Emptying”

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Some of you remember the very public blunder made by TV personality Steve Harvey during his hosting of the Miss Universe Contest. He announced the wrong winner at first. It is no fun to make a human mistake on a stage as big as that one. But did you know the mistakes did not end there.

The whole incident became messier when after correcting his mistake on stage Steve took to Twitter to make another apology. His tweet read, “I apologize to Miss Columbia spelled with a “u” when he meant Miss Colombia, spelled with an “o.” Then it got worse as he apologized to Miss Philippians, which is a book of the bible, instead of Miss Philippines, which is the country.

On this Palm Sunday we heard a passage from Philippians which tells us about the example of faithful living Jesus set by how he lived his life in this world. He was God but did not throw that around in people’s faces or exploit others with his power. Instead of using force to get people to obey God, Jesus emptied himself and discovered in his most empty state of humbleness he was most fully able to obey God, and call others to obey God.

Jesus became that which our world often considers weak, chicken-hearted, and defenseless... he became vulnerable. And in his vulnerability God was able to exalt his name above all names in heaven and on earth. Paul writes that in that moment of emptiness Jesus was most filled with the Spirit of God.

As we think of Emptiness, we realize there are debilitating types like loneliness, isolation and grief. If we don’t handle these times in life tenderly, they may catch us up in years and years of feeling empty inside. But Paul is speaking of the kind of emptiness which is created when we clean out our soul and make more of a home for God’s living Spirit to dwell in us and draw out from within us our truest self.

I contend that our culture has not honored Paul’s kind of emptiness very well because we don’t really understand it. We think of emptiness as a sign of being weak, meek, and mild. Today, Paul is telling us how Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection, turns upside down our understanding of power and emptiness. In fact in his Palm Sunday Sermon Pope Francis told the listeners he encouraged those who were speaking out yesterday at the March of Our lives to keep shouting instead of simply being quiet. So I suspect we will continue to hear shouts of “enough,” and talk about privilege, and stories titled “Metoo,” related to sexual harassment in the workplace. And we will continue to hear calls for better understanding of mental illness. In fact, this morning I want to share a story about the trap of Mental illness.

Kevin Love is a forward for the Cleveland Cavaliers and these are his words, “On November 5th, right after halftime against the Hawks, I had a panic attack. Since that day, almost everything about the way I think about my mental health has changed.

I've never been comfortable sharing much about myself. Growing up, you figure out really quickly what it takes to "be a man." It's like a playbook: Be strong. Don't talk about your feelings. Get through it on your own. So for 29 years of my life, I followed that playbook.

Until recently, I thought mental health was someone else's problem. To me it was form of weakness that could derail my success in sports or make me seem weird or different.

Then the panic attack happened during a game. A perfect storm of things were about to collide. I was stressed about issues I'd been having with my family. I wasn't sleeping well. On the court expectations after a bad start were weighing on me.

I was winded within the first few possessions. That was strange. And my game was just off. Then, in the third quarter coach Lue called a timeout. When I got to the bench, I felt my heart racing faster than usual. I was having trouble catching my breath. It's hard to describe, but everything was spinning, like my brain was trying to climb out of my head. The air felt thick and heavy. My mouth was like chalk. When I got up to walk out of the huddle, I knew I couldn't reenter the game — like, literally couldn't do it physically.

Coach Lue came up to me and I told him, "I'll be right back," and I ran to the locker room. I was running from room to room, like I was looking for something I couldn't find. It was like my body was trying to say to me, you're about to die. I ended up on the floor in the training room, lying on my back, trying to get enough air to breathe.

The next part was a blur. Someone from the team accompanied me to the Cleveland Clinic. They ran a bunch of tests. Everything seemed to check out, which was a relief. But I remember leaving the hospital thinking, Wait ... then what just happened?

Call it a stigma or call it fear or insecurity but what I was worried about wasn't just my own inner struggles but how difficult it was to talk about them.

So I did one seemingly little thing that turned out to be a big thing. The Cavs helped me find a therapist, and I set up an appointment. I went to my first appointment with some skepticism. But he surprised me. I learned it's easy to assume we know ourselves, but once you peel back the layers it's amazing how much there is to still discover."

I hope, as a society, we are breaking out of a time where we argue touchstone issues so long that they end up swept under the carpet. It isn't easy for any of us to talk about these issues. It is especially difficult if you have been a victim. But they are coming to light. Paul's approach to the theme of emptying can lead us to education and healthy debate and then onward to work together. We have an opportunity to build a society where no victim has to hide or fear they won't be taken seriously... A society where we honor each other's vulnerability and lift up each other to the God who is able to exalt each and all of us. We see in our passage today how being vulnerable is actually a sign of great inner strength.

We all wrestle with an inner life. And thankfully Lent is a season set aside for just this kind of work. It isn't easy. But when we share our inner selves in the right setting, with the right people, we find there is healing and new strength. Through emptying ourselves God moves in and lifts us and our society up in unexpectedly wonderful ways.

As we think about the theme of emptying one Author writes, "love your neighbor as yourself also means love yourself as your neighbor." I have no doubt if a friend came to any one of us and said they had something important they needed to talk about we would make time. So I wonder why don't we give ourselves the same permission? Spiritual Emptying is when, instead of keeping oneself in perpetual safe-deposit; we exercise the courage to share with others the fullness of the self we love.

And that is the best gift God has given us to share, ourselves, so let's take care of ourselves, love ourselves and share ourselves with each other; for all of us need a "Spring Cleaning" of the soul.

The words in Philippians today are believed to be lyrics to an ancient hymn sung by some of the earliest followers of Jesus. These words remind me of lyrics from another well-loved Hymn, "come into my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for you."

AMEN