



Diane Christopher

Gifts of the Dark Wood 2: The Gift of Emptiness

Luke 17:33; Colossians 2:9-10

February 21, 2016

In March, 2008, the mayor of the village of Sarpourenx (sar-poor-enks) in southwest France threatened residents with severe punishment if they died. The reason? The town cemetery was full, and there was no place left to bury the people. This village needed some emptiness!

Today we talk about the gift of emptiness. Turn with me to our scripture passage found on the sermon page in your bulletin.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, open your word to us this day, and may it fill us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Read Luke 17:33 "Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it. (The Word of the Lord....)

If I took a poll and asked the question, "Which would you rather be: full or empty?" most of you would probably say, "Full." Right? Think about it. "Full" is good.

Full church on Sunday. We pastors think that is good.

A home full of great furniture. All right!

A marriage full of laughter and love. Really good!

A full stomach.

A full bank account.

A full pantry.

A full gas tank.

Full is good.

But if you think about it: in this life, for the most part being full is fleeting. For example, an analysis was done on the spending habits of American families. It revealed that the vast majority of income is spent on items that need *constant replenishing*. Most of our money is spent on food that will be eaten, gas that will be burned, clothes that will wear out and entertainment that lasts a moment. Just think about that cable bill that makes you cringe every time you pay it.

Because being full is fleeting, we all will experience emptiness. The severest kind of emptiness is the loss of someone close to you. C. S. Lewis said after the death of his wife: "Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything" (*A Grief Observed*).

Another author, Gerald Sittser, lost his mother, his wife and 4-year-old daughter in a car accident. He wrote about it in his book *A Grace Disguised*. He said the barrenness was overwhelming. "Will this emptiness continue forever? Will I feel this way the rest of my life? Am I doomed to sail forever on a vast sea of nothingness?"

Of course, emptiness is not just the loss of a loved one. How about the empty nest syndrome? There is emptiness when health is fading. How many of you have experienced:

- a prayer that's unanswered,
- a fear that's haunting,
- a depression that's lingering,
- a faith life that's stagnant,
- a marriage that's struggling,
- a temptation that always wins,
- financial loss
- broken relationships?

All of these things can make us feel empty inside. But I wonder if emptiness can be a good thing. Maybe our scripture passage can be read this way: Whoever tries to keep their life full will lose it, and whoever empties their life will preserve it.

In other words, in the Bible, emptiness is a good thing. We can start from the very beginning in Genesis 1: “The earth was formless and empty...” God filled it with creation.

A poor widow is out of food until a prophet of God shows up and fills her empty jars with oil and food. Out of the emptiness comes a miracle.

A bride and groom run out of wine at their wedding reception until a carpenter shows up and fills their empty wine jars with the best wine ever. Out of the emptiness, people are catching a glimpse of the Messiah.

Fisherman have empty nets until a teacher stops by, tells them to fish on the other side of the boat, and their nets are filled to the brim. Out of the emptiness, people become followers of Jesus.

But the best example of emptiness is this:

Philippians 2:7 (NRSV)

Jesus Christ, “though he was in the form of God...*emptied* himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”

Jesus emptied himself of all his glory and became one of us. Jesus emptied himself to show us what God is like. Jesus emptied himself by experiencing death on a cross. It was on that cross Jesus cried these empty words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And in this Great Emptiness on the cross, God entered in, took Jesus and highly exalted him and gave him the name above every name.

As a result of this Great Emptiness on the cross, our lives are changed.

Before the resurrection, the cross was an execution tool. After the resurrection, the *empty cross* became a symbol of hope and forgiveness, and we now have bold access to God. Talk about a changed life from emptiness!

Before the resurrection, the grave was the final chapter, the end of everything. But because of the resurrection, the *empty tomb* says that beyond death is a whole new life. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that will raise us up. We are meant to live forever in a glorified existence that is beyond anything we can imagine. What a changed life from emptiness!

Before the resurrection, the burial cloths were a means to finish the burial process. After the resurrection, the *empty burial cloths* were proof that Jesus was and is alive, and therefore present with us today.

These gifts of the empty cross, the empty tomb, the empty burial cloths changed our lives forever. The gift of emptiness is the presence of Jesus.

Look at Mary at the tomb. Jesus appeared to her in the emptiness of her grief. As the two men walked the Emmaus Road, Jesus walked with them, had dinner with them and then appeared to them in the emptiness of their confusion. When the disciples were hiding from the Jewish leaders, Jesus appeared to them in the emptiness of their fear. When doubting Thomas refused to believe, Jesus appeared to him in the emptiness of his unbelief.

We are never alone in our emptiness. We are filled with the presence of Christ.

When you hear that dreaded diagnosis from the oncologist, Jesus is there in the emptiness of your shock.
When you get a pink slip in your pay envelope, Jesus is there in the emptiness of unemployment.
When you run out of money before you run out of bills, Jesus is there in the emptiness of your need.

When your marriage unravels and reconciliation seems impossible, Jesus is there in the emptiness of your brokenness.

When you haven't the slightest inclination that God exists, much less cares, Jesus is there in the emptiness of your dark night of the soul.

The gift of emptiness is the presence of Christ.

I have season tickets to Broadway in Tucson, musicals that have been on Broadway and are now touring the country. Since I have season tickets, I have a package deal. This past week, this package deal included "The Book of Mormon."

Now, I was warned ahead of time about this play. Our tickets had in big letters, written across the ticket: "Warning! Explicit language. Parents beware!" I wasn't sure if as a pastor I should be attending this play, but I went anyway last Thursday evening.

The play follows 2 Mormon boys on mission to Africa with the task of getting people for the Mormon church. The play was very well done, very funny, and yes, very raunchy. But I found that I was not so much troubled by the raunchy language as I was by the conclusion of the play.

At the end of the play, the people determined that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you love one another. At first glance, this sounds wonderful. But it made me sad because they left out the wondrous part of that statement. We love one another because God first loved us. We love one another based on the way Jesus loves us.

I left that play feeling sad because our culture is emptying itself of God. And if our culture is emptying itself of God, with what does it fill itself?

About 350 years ago, Blaise Pascal, mathematician, philosopher and physicist, observed that the human heart is like an "infinite abyss." He discovered that we human beings try in vain to fill our hearts with everything around us — education, jobs, homes, money (I can add raunchiness). But none of these earthly things can help, because "this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite...object; in other words by God himself."

Hear it from scripture: Colossians 2:9-10 "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ."

Did you hear that? You have been given fullness in Christ. That is a mind-blowing statement. It is a treasure trove of spiritual wealth. We will spend out whole life exploring the richness of that statement.

When you leave this place today, remember that statement: you are given fullness in Christ. This is the gift of emptiness: you not only have the presence of Christ, you have the fullness of Christ. Meditate on this statement. Explore it. Pray over it. And ask this question: What does it mean in my life that I am filled with the fullness of Christ?

Here is one man's answer to that question. I take you back to the man I mentioned at the beginning of this message, Gerald Sittser, who lost 3 members of his family in a car accident. Three years after the accident, he writes what it feels like to be filled with God:

"I still want them back, and I always will, no matter what happens as a result of their deaths. Yet the grief I feel is sweet as well as bitter. I still have a sorrowful soul; yet I wake up every morning joyful, eager for what the new day will bring.

Never have I felt as much pain as I have in the last three years; yet never have I experienced as much pleasure in simply being alive and living an ordinary life.

Never have I felt so broken; yet never have I been so whole.

Never have I been so aware of my weakness and vulnerability; yet never have I been so content and felt so strong.

Never has my soul been more dead; yet never has my soul been more alive.

Above all, I have become aware of the power of God's grace and my need for it.

My soul has grown because it has been awakened to the goodness and love of

God. God has been present in my life these past three years, even mysteriously in

the accident. God will continue to be present to the end of my life and through all eternity. God is growing my soul, making it bigger, and filling it with himself.

The gift of emptiness is more of Christ: his presence and his fullness.

I end by praying for you the prayer of Paul to his church (Ephesians 3: 16-19):
I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be *filled to the measure of all the fullness of God*.

Amen and amen.