

The Gift of Emptiness: *Mark 15:22-38*

Norwalk Christian Church, Lent 2, Year C, The Gifts of the Dark Wood

“Let me begin by telling you a little about yourself,” writes author and Unitarian minister Forrest Church in the preface to his book *Lifecraft*.

To one extent or another the following is true:
You are self-conscious about your appearance.
You feel guilty about things you have done or failed to do.
You sometimes have a hard time accepting yourself or forgiving others.
You are insecure sexually.
You are a less-than-perfect parent,
or a less-than-perfect child of imperfect parents, or both.
You are a frustrated husband, wife, or partner, or you are frustrated not to be a husband, wife, or partner.
You have secrets, which you might betray, or which might betray you, at any moment.
However successful you are, you fail in ways that matter both to you and to your loved ones.
Beyond all this, your life is stressful, your happiness fleeting, your health insecure.
You worry about aging.
You sometimes worry about dying.
More than once your heart has been broken by betrayal or loss.
And however successful you may be, however deep your faith, when the roof caves in, you shake your fist at heaven, the fates, or life itself.
You beg for an answer to the question “why”—“Why this? Why me? Why now?”
You wonder what your life means.

Chances are you spend a good deal of your *life* dwelling on the things I just read in *less than a minute*. Why do our shortcomings have so much power over us?

Most of us live life assuming that if others knew the “real you,” well, then, they would have nothing to do with us. And anytime we hear something critical or experience rejection, we say, deep down--see, I knew it was true. I am worthless. No one could love me.

This carries over to our relationship with God, as well. Maybe that’s why we are hesitant to move into deeper relationship with God. We avoid spiritual practices that move us to more intimate places with the divine, for fear of being exposed before God as the fraud we really are.

Instead, we look to religion to build us up. To convince us otherwise, that we are not the failures we think we are. Just a few easy, self-help steps and you can live your best life, now! We come to church and God looking for a spiritual pat on the back--atta-boy--hoping the darkness will go away....

But it doesn't. It never does.

Maybe you felt that sting of guilt as our scripture was being read today. The story of the death of Christ--it's not one we read much, anymore. If we do, it's usually this time of year, often only on Good Friday--if we even attend a Good Friday service--and then we hurry on to Easter Sunday, to the celebration and fancy clothes and hidden eggs.

Many find the Cross of Christ to be too morbid of a symbol, one that promotes unhealthy shame and guilt. I admit, I've felt the same. Thinking about the death of Jesus leaves me feeling terrible. That I'm unworthy. That my sin killed my God. I feel bad enough already, I don't need *that* level of guilt.

But what if the cross isn't at all about producing guilt, but finally freeing us from it? What if the cross isn't an indictment of our sinfulness, but a repudiation of it? That is, Jesus died, not because of us, but for us. Not as a result of our sin, but to show us the path where we could finally be free from the fear of our sin and shortcomings. That we could overcome the fear, and learn to truly live.

On the cross, Jesus cries out one of the most emptiest and most human of all cries: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That's how it feels. That's how we feel--that we are too dark for God, and God has left us to die alone.

Jesus felt that emptiness--the emptiness we all feel. Yet, in that moment of emptiness, something profound happens. Jesus may not have found God, but God finds Jesus.

And there, on the cross, as Jesus breathed his last, God took over, and opened the door to life.

At several times during his ministry, Jesus taught his disciples, "If you want to find your life, lose it. And if you lose your life, you will find it." On the cross, Jesus loses it all, and yet, life emerges.

And in this, we begin to see the message of salvation--Get empty, and let God find you.

When things aren't going right in our lives, our instinct is to take something, do something, eat something, drink something, buy something, get something. There's always something new and more we could do to try to fill the void.

But the void can't be filled--not like that. The void is there for a reason. It is the space for God, but for God to dwell in us, we need to clear space. Martin Luther wrote, "God created the world out of nothing, and as long as we are nothing, God can make something out of us."

Have you ever been walking through a dark wood, and then, all of the sudden, you come to a clearing. A field that, after the thickness of the forest, feels like a whole new world, wide-open and bright. The sky is clear, and the light of the moon, once obscure, now shines all around. You can see clearly again. You can breath deeply again. The fear you felt in the dark wood goes away, as you look up at the night sky and see the vastness of the heavens, stretched out before you.

When you finally cross the field, and enter back into the Dark Wood, you enter renewed, maybe even inspired. In the emptiness, you became full again.

In the reading from Parker Palmer that Marti read earlier, he talks about this emptiness as if it were a gift. “My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead; my will was impotent; my ego was shattered. But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness, I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul.”

We are so full, with good things and bad things--so stuffed, that for many of us, we haven't seen our soul in a very long time. It's buried, underneath all our good intentions, and self-help and fears and failures and depressions and worries.

Here's the truth of the cross: you *are* unworthy. Your sin is *great*. Your failures, *magnificent*. You are insecure. You worry too much. Were you there, you'd probably either be in the crowd, crying for Jesus to be crucified, or far, far away from the crowd, too scared to death to get involved.

And now that we have all that cleared out of the way, look up. See the vastness of the heavens. The unconditional love of God. *Unconditional*. That means that there is no fear or worry. There is nothing you can do or should do to earn it. In spite of whatever baggage you carry, whatever fear is paralyzing you...in spite of your guilt, earned and unearned--you are loved. Your creator loves you.

And on that cross, all your fears are crucified and put to death. Yet, even though your fear has been put to death, that doesn't mean all your inadequacies are gone. They remain, still. You are, after all, human.

But who ever said being human was a bad thing? It is what you are. It is what God created you to be. And it is what God left the vastness of the heavens to enter into the dark wood of life and become--human--so that we could learn how to live the life God called us to live.

And now that you have emptied yourself of this fear, God has found you. And now, now, you can begin to live again. Amen.