

Maybe Empty is Not So Bad After All
The Monroe Congregational Church
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Philippians 2:1-13

It seems that everyone Dorothy encountered in the Wizard of Oz was looking for something. Remember these lyrics? "I could while away the hours, conferring with the flowers, consulting with the rain... and my head I'd be scratching, while my thoughts were busy hatching... if I only had a brain"

The scarecrow wanted a brain. He wanted to be respected for his intelligence and wisdom. Gosh, who doesn't? The tin woodsman wanted a heart so that he could be able to feel emotion, to be able to give and receive love. What would a life without love feel like? And the lion wanted courage. He wanted others to respect him, he wanted to be proud of himself. Sure! We all want that!

In focusing on what they lack, the scarecrow, woodsman and lion embrace their emptiness.

Maybe some of us here today know what it's like to feel empty. We exhaust our reserves of energy and emotion, running after approval, seeking honor, craving love and respect, wanting to be somebody that other people will consider important. Emptiness comes in all kinds of shapes and sizes.

Sometimes we feel an emotional emptiness that feels heavy and dark. We watch or listen to the news and there is just so much pain and anger, and so very little we feel that we can do about it. We watch our loved ones go through pain and grief which leaves us feeling something called "compassion fatigue". It's an emptiness that masks itself known in sadness, irritability, anger, or passive aggressiveness.

There's the financial emptiness we feel when money's tight and we simply do not feel we have enough to get by. The car has broken down, needing expensive repairs. Will our retirement be comfortable? We see how everyone else around us is doing and they seem to be doing fine so why can't I be as well? This can create resentment towards others, our friends and neighbors who seem (on the surface at least) to be doing so much better than us.

There is relational emptiness. We look around us and it seems like everyone else has friends, a support system. Seeing the happy togetherness of others can leave us feeling jealous, hurt, spiteful, or just deeply sad.

Finally, there is spiritual emptiness that causes people to lead a life that's "all about me" versus "it's really about us." It's an emptiness that abuses and enslaves people, it wipes out the Imago Dei, the very Image of God, in others and our environment.

This is the kind of emptiness Paul describes in today's text. Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is considered by many scholars to be one of the earliest statements of faith in the early church. He is writing it from jail. After some lovely opening words about how much he cares for them, Paul – the founder of their church, makes some important points.

It appears there were some in the Philippian church who were pushing themselves up the ladder of influence wanting to control and be in charge. Paul pleads with his readers to live together in unity and humility. He tells them that his joy will be made complete when the church can learn to live united in both head and heart.

And how are they to do that? They are to empty themselves, as Jesus himself did. Through incarnation, God became a bona fide human being in order to relate with what we feel, think, believe, and experience. Jesus went from the summit of divine glory to the depths of human suffering and death.

In the ancient world, death by crucifixion was just about the worst thing that could ever happen to you. It inflicted more than just excruciating pain and led to a slow and cruel death; it meant public display of such pain and death to invite the mockery of bystanders. Crucifixion was hitting rock bottom; one could not possibly get any lower. For Jesus, death on the cross showed the extreme of his humility and how far he was willing to go.

There's a wonderful story in the early history of the Christian church that illustrates how far those who follow Christ can be willing to go. Two major plagues hit the Roman Empire in the years after the church began. Roman doctors, during this time, literally headed for the hills. Basically, anyone that was not sick, took off and let the sick and dying fend for themselves. Everyone did this; except the Christians. They were the ones who took care of the ill. Why did they do this? Why did they put themselves in harm's way when they could have run off to safety as well? They did it because they saw

those sick and dying as the sisters and brothers and decided to be in service to them.

They followed Christ's example and poured out themselves, so much so that they became full of the Holy Spirit. Because you know what? Actually being emptied out can be a good thing.

Emptying ourselves of our past hurts and traumas;
Emptying ourselves of our need to succeed at any cost;
Emptying ourselves of our need to be needed;
Emptying ourselves of our desire to be first;
Emptying ourselves in service to others.

The question for you and I today is what each of us need to pour out in our own lives that is getting in the way of the Holy Spirit filling our hearts and souls. We may be called to pour out our self-importance. We may be called to pour out our overfed egos. We may be called to empty out any sense of entitlement from deep within us and refill ourselves with love for God and neighbor. We may be called to set aside any privileges we think we have been given and run straight to the back of the line to encourage others to go first.

You remember how the story of the Wizard of Oz ends, don't you? The empty-headed scarecrow hatches a clever plan. The barrel chested woodsman cries tender tears of compassion. And the cowardly lion, well, when it all comes down to it, when Dorothy's well-being is on the line, he's going in, no matter what! Indeed, as it turns out, they are far from empty. All the things that matter the most to the scarecrow, the tinman and the lion, the things they craved so intensely, they had already!

Now, you tell me -- I know you know this because the movie makes it all so clear -- when do all these gifts of wisdom and love and courage which were there all along become apparent? When they are thinking about Dorothy, not themselves! When they are not thinking about their own needs, but the needs of another!

The scarecrow and the woodsman and the lion find their true selves, uncover their true identities and unleash their considerable gifts only when they give themselves away. And in their emptiness, they find unity. Of course, they don't look anything like the heroes we are used to. When Dorothy awakes

from her dream, they turn out to be nothing but the humble farmhands on her Auntie Em's farm.

These are the heroes, the ones who empty themselves, the ones who become nothing for the sake of those they love, who, together, in community with each other, are everything that matters. Which, of course, Dorothy understands at last, because of course: *There's no place like home!*

In our humility and unity, Paul calls us in the church to serve others. Helping a refugee or feeding someone at a soup kitchen or giving someone a shelter who doesn't have one, being a servant to these folks can give us life.

Our job in this time and place is to appreciate, give thanks, and be good stewards of this faith home to which we've been entrusted. All that you most desire, all that really ever matters, you already have within you: Smarts, love, courage. So let us be of the same mind! Let us have in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself and was obedient to the One who called him ... all the way down that yellow brick road. Amen.