

“Living in the Shadows: Emptiness”

Luke 4:1-13

March 10, 2019

When our daughters were little and our son Jacob was not yet born, we would often dine at our neighborhood Chinese restaurant. Most nights, the owner, Mike, would stop by our table to chat for a bit. He would teach us something about the food we were eating or about Chinese geography and culture. The walls of Mike’s restaurant were adorned with large paintings, each with a different number of objects. Mike’s favorite was the painting that had children pushing a cart laden with fresh produce. “How many children?” Mike would ask us. We counted 10.

“Why 10?” he continued the litany? “Why?” we inquired. “Two hands full!” he would reply, raising his hands exuberantly! “The ten children are a sign of abundance. The father of these children has everything he needs. Two hands full!”

With gratitude and humility, I confess, that although I do not have ten children, I am like the father of those children in the painting. I have always had enough. Enough bread to eat. Enough friends and family with which to share it. Enough stories to tell. Enough to help someone else. Enough to bring the same delighted smile lines to the corner of my eyes as were on the face of our exuberant friend telling us the story of the painting.

That’s why it was so incredibly disorienting the day that our family came face to face with the inability to take care of ourselves. Some of you have heard me tell the story before. It was 18 ½ years ago. We were returning home from a two-hands-full kind of vacation. We had spent a week in Paris, France; Hannah happily munching on daily baguettes, Helen climbing to the top of the Notre Dame Cathedral she had come to know through the Disney Hunchback movie, Phillip and I feasting our eyes on the impressionist paintings at the Musee d’Orsay. As if that were not enough, our week in Paris was followed by a week under the blue, blue skies of Southern France celebrating a family wedding. We were seminary students at the time, and spent every dime we had saved up on this once in a lifetime trip.

When we boarded the plane for our flight home to Atlanta, we had no money in the bank and only enough

cash in our pockets to buy milk and cereal when we returned home. Because we were headed home, our checked luggage held our extra clothes and toiletries. Our carry-on bag contained the things we had collected on our journey, two bottles of wine and an iron cicada lantern.

But our flight didn’t take us home that day. Half way across the Atlantic, our plane took a sharp turn north on a trajectory toward Gander, Newfoundland. While we waited on the tarmac for 12 hours, we began to hear the horrible news that will forever make September 11 a day to remember, lives’ lost, security shattered, journeys redirected. With two small children between us, and no money in our pockets, Phillip and I began to wonder, how we were going to take care of ourselves in this strange land. We would later learn that 8,000 people from nations all around the world in the 38 planes parked around us were wondering the same thing.

Our Gospel text for today, starts out not with emptiness, not with desert and wilderness, but with the fullness of spirit of one still wet from the waters of his Baptism. “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.” It is clear as the story continues that even though the landscape was barren and his belly was empty, Jesus’ spirit remained full.

The Gospels of Luke and Matthew give us the most complete tellings of Jesus’ 40-day, post-Baptism wilderness sojourn. In Matthew, God’s soul-filling words spoken to Jesus from the heavens, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” butt right up against the barrenness of the desert, the cravings of a hungry belly, and the truth empty lies of the devil.

In between Baptism and temptation, between the words of divine identity and delight, “You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” and the dusty deprivations of the desert, Luke, on the other hand, inserts Jesus’ human pedigree, a genealogy reaching back from Jesus through his earthly father Joseph, enumerating ancestors whose stories

are lost to us along with well-known foibled luminaries like David and Abraham and ultimately, Adam, also a son of God.

One hand full of divine identity. One hand full of human heritage. Jesus, descendent of divinity and dust enters this forty-day season of emptiness with two hands full. It is enough.

It is enough for Jesus to resist the tempter's invitation to feed himself, to gather up kingdoms for himself, to engage in senseless risky behavior and lose himself testing God. It is enough to answer the challenges of the religious authorities, enough for the teaching of thick-headed disciples, enough for the feeding of thousands, the healing of children, the casting out of demons, the bringing of good news to the poor, the loneliness of the garden, the humiliation of the trial, the pain of the cross. It is enough.

At Second Church, we siblings of soil and salvation, enter these forty days thinking together about living in the shadows of life. Across the series of Sundays, we will go with one another into the shadows of fear, doubt, weariness, guilt, today the shadow of emptiness and on Palm Sunday, the shadow of the cross. We will enter the shadows with the confident hope that we go under the sheltering wing of God, in the shadow of the of the Almighty. On the other side of these 40 days, we imagine with hope that we will have grown deeper in faith and trust in God who is with us most especially in the darkest parts of life.

We journey with Jesus and with one another, in these forty days, emptying ourselves, our pantries, our calendars of the things that leave little room for God's spirit to fill us up and lead us out, little silence for God's word to affirm our beloved identity, little memory that God has and will provide for our every need. Dwelling for a time in these shadows, thinking together about them, helps us remember God's presence even in the shadows, ready to fill us when we are empty, ready to accompany us when we are afraid, ready to encourage us when we are doubtful, ready to offer us rest when we are weary, wholeness when we are broken by shame, new life in the shadow of death.

The Spirit invites us, even as it invited Jesus, to step into a time when we might learn again to fully rely on God. For forty days. For all our days. For bright light days and shadow days.

For those of us who have every means to care for ourselves, we do not go willingly. For our lives are full! Full of things to do. Full of things to take care of. Full of rich things to eat,

exciting opportunities to explore. We are afraid to show up empty-handed. We are afraid that without these things to do, this food to eat, these kingdoms to care for that we are not.

Some of us know that life is too full. Tasks, and time with family and friends are slipping through our hands. We long to lay it all down. For us, emptiness is more shade than shadow. We long for a day to do nothing, for less stuff to clean up, for the taste of real food on a tongue not numbed by fast food on the fly.

And there are some of us living even now in the shadow what we all fear, empty cupboard, empty wallet, empty house, empty hand.

We are afraid in our emptiness that the devil might come to us and whisper the lie that we are all too ready to believe, "you do not have enough food for your belly, enough power in your position, enough security for your risk, enough stuff in your control."

A clever kid of about eight years' old who has recently learned about the various states of matter, solid, liquid, gas will answer the age-old optimist/pessimist question, "Is the glass half empty or half full?" this way, "The glass is neither halfway full or halfway empty, it is in fact full." She will answer this way because she has learned that where the water is not, there is air. The glass is, in fact, full to overflowing with water, and air.

On my best days, I try to be that kid. When emptiness overshadows me, I might do well to remember that the emptiness may have opened a space where the Holy Spirit might come in.

Novelist and poet, Wendell Berry captures the overflowing possibility of emptiness in his poem,

A Brass Bowlⁱ

*Worn to brightness,
This bowl opens outward to the world,
Like the marriage of a pair we sometimes know.
Filled full, it holds not greedily.
Empty, it fills with light
That is heaven's and it's own.
It holds forever for a while."*

Recently, in her podcast, *On Being*, Krista Tippett interviewed philosopher and Catholic social innovator, Jean Vanier. The L'Arche movement, which he founded,

centers around people with mental disabilities. According to Tippet, Vanier has devoted his life to the practical application of Christianity's most paradoxical teachings — that there's power in humility, strength in weakness, and light in the darkness of human existence. During the interview, Vanier shared this guiding principal of the L'Arche Communities:

“The big thing for me is to love reality and not live in the imagination, not live in what could have been or what should have been or what can be (it is to) love reality and then discover that God is present in the reality.”ⁱⁱ

Shortly after midnight on September 12, 2001, with a bag of souvenirs and empty bellies, Phillip, Helen, Hannah and I, along with 8000 fellow refugees, stepped out onto the tarmac and into waiting school buses that took us to the airplane terminal where Salvation Army and Red Cross volunteers greeted us with Pizza Hut pizza and Kentucky Fried Chicken. And while our luggage remained in the cargo holds of our airplanes, we, empty-handed passengers were ferried to shelters across the island, where beds and towels and toothbrushes awaited us. Over the next six days, people, some whose only source of income was a government check would share their food, their time and their clothing with us. They would provide “the plane people,” as we were called, with towels and toiletries, long distance phone service and even excursions. We would hear the stories of passengers from Greece and Nigeria, Chicago and Los Angeles. Our hosts would give us the opportunity to pitch in when we were ready and as we were able, to share in the meal cooking and the laundry washing. I even got to use a bit of my college German to help a displaced family translate their need and their gratitude. While we were on planes lamenting our helplessness, Gander was turning schools into hotels, and ice rinks into giant refrigerators. Our emptiness was met by God's faithfulness. Our helplessness was met by God's power.

This weekend our spirit cup at Second Church is being filled to overflowing with the beautiful music of Florence Price, gathered, played, directed, and sung by a host of gifted musicians. Florence Smith Price lived in the shadow of bias against her race and gender that might have prohibited her expression and our reception of her overflowing, God-given talent, had she believed the tempters lie, “you are not enough.” Full of spirit, she poured her God-given gifts into music that bears witness to the worthiness of the vessel that

shines with a light that is God's.

Jesus meets the emptiness of the desert and the taunts of the devil with two hands full of the truth that empty or full, he is God's beloved. It is enough.

We enter these days with two hands full of the truth that empty or full, we are God's beloved. It is enough.

ⁱ Berry, Wendell. “A Brass Bowl.” *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013. 159.

ⁱⁱ <https://onbeing.org/programs/jean-vanier-the-wisdom-of-tenderness>