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Mark 15:22-38

“The Gift of Emptiness”

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Mark 15:22-38 Common English Bible

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means Skull Place. They tried to give him wine mixed with myrrh, but he didn’t take it. They crucified him. They divided up his clothes, drawing lots for them to determine who would take what. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The notice of the formal charge against him was written, “The king of the Jews.” They crucified two outlaws with him, one on his right and one on his left. People walking by insulted him, shaking their heads and saying, “Ha! So you were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, were you? Save yourself and come down from that cross!” In the same way, the chief priests were making fun of him among themselves, together with the legal experts. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down from the cross. Then we’ll see and believe.” Even those who had been crucified with Jesus insulted him. From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was dark. At three, Jesus cried out with a loud shout, “Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani,” which means, “My God, my God, why have you left me?” After hearing him, some standing there said, “Look! He’s calling Elijah!” Someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, and put it on a pole. He offered it to Jesus to drink, saying, “Let’s see if Elijah will come to take him down.”  But Jesus let out a loud cry and died. The curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “This man was certainly God’s Son.”

CONTEMPORARY READING (Parker Palmer)

“Like a wild animal, soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. I learned about these qualities during my bouts with depression. In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed. 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.”

There is a parable in the Gospel of Thomas that I want to share with you. You will not find the Gospel of Thomas in your Bibles, it is a sayings gospel of Jesus. In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus said, “The kingdom is like a woman carrying a jar full of meal. While she was walking on a distant road, the handle of the jar broke, the meal poured out behind her on the road. She was unaware, she had not noticed the misfortune. When she came to her house, she put the jar down and found it empty.[[1]](#footnote-2) Can you imagine how she felt when she got home and figured out what had happened? That was probably her only food source for days. She might have gone back and tried to see if she could salvage some of the food.

Have you ever done that? Tried to scoop up the spilled sugar that feel out of the jar? Tried to pick up the rice granules that spilled when you tore open the bag?

Emptiness. My dad and stepmom used to live in Auburn, Nebraska. Their town had a Piggly Wiggly grocery store until it closed down. You would drive down the roads and it would just be empty. Emptiness.

Just a few years ago I was talking to my mom about when I went to college and she said that she had cried for days. I couldn’t believe it, I said, “Really? I had no idea.” And she said, “Well, you never called so you did not know.” Have you ever felt empty? Maybe it is after the holidays when all the relatives go home and suddenly your house seems bigger than it was. Or you have hosted a sleepover for 8 11 years olds and as the last child is picked up, you wonder how your house fit that many people. Or the degree that you worked so hard to receive is earned. The project is finished, the relationship is over, there is no more job to go to. Emptiness.

The great reformer Martin Luther said, “God created the world out of nothing, and as long as we are nothing, God can make something out of us”[[2]](#footnote-3). When we first experience emptiness, our first instinct might be to fill the space. Fill it with noise or actions or thoughts or plans or people. We try and fill it because emptiness feels scary. I remember hearing someone pray before they were about to talk about their faith. They prayed, “Help me God to empty myself out, so that there is none of me left, but only you O God. Fill me up like your vessel and use me.”

Do you remember tennis star Boris Becker? He was at the top of the tennis world, and he said he was on the brink of suicide. He had won Wimbledon twice, once as the youngest player. He was rich, he had all the material possessions he needed. He had everything, but he said he was so unhappy. He had no inner peace. He said he was a puppet on a string.[[3]](#footnote-4) He sounds like so many other folks that have achieved all that they wanted in life, and yet they feel empty. Elnes says, “We must first experience the ‘wholly otherness’ of God before we encounter the God within us”[[4]](#footnote-5) Jesus says, “Whoever tries to preserve their life will lost it, but whoever loses their life will preserve it” (Luke 17:33 CEB).

This morning we heard about Jesus’ crucifixion. Some of you might avoid the Good Friday worship service because you don’t like to hear this gruesome story. The greatest symbol of the Dark Wood gift of emptiness is the Cross[[5]](#footnote-6). We hear Jesus cry out in the emptiest and most human of all cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?[[6]](#footnote-7). In that great and terrible moment of emptiness, not even Jesus could find God[[7]](#footnote-8). But we see the Cross not as the end of the story, but as the beginning of a new one not because Jesus found God as he stared from the Cross into the vast emptiness of the heavens but because God found Jesus within this great emptiness[[8]](#footnote-9).

Jesus felt empty despair and it was at that moment that God’s possibility of life beyond that pain was revealed[[9]](#footnote-10). When we feel like we are at our most empty, and we yearn to find God, God will find us. Many of us feel empty inside and we fear that there is nothing of worth within us. Maybe, just maybe we could let go of our obsession with worthiness and embrace the idea that getting empty is the best way to find God. I invite us all to think of something that we want to let go of, a past hurt, a chronic problem, a broken relationship. Think about how the things that fill us, like ego, a fear of being unloved, the worry of not measuring up, all of that needs to be emptied so that we might live. What needs to die in your life so that you can live more fully?[[10]](#footnote-11)

We have a choice when we carry around old hurts and injustices. We can let them sit, and grow and fester, making ourselves sick with the resentments that come from these past events OR we can turn it over to God freeing ourselves from the darkness and opening our hearts to hope.

Think about the contemporary reading that we shared together. We know how to survive in hard places. Something within us knows how to stay alive even when the rest of us wants to die. It is our tough and tenacious soul. God cares about us. When that cloud of doubt lingers with us, when we want to close our ears, when we feel like we have lost our faith, take heart because the loss will open a space for a new possibility. Our emptiness is a gift because we can take a breath and realize that this is an opportunity to begin again. We can let the resentments go and breathe in hope for the future. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/thomas/gospelthomas97.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. “Gifts of the Dark Wood” Eric Elnes p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/e/emptiness.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. “Gifts of the Dark Wood” Eric Elnes p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “Gifts of the Dark Wood” Eric Elnes p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. “Gifts of the Dark Wood” Eric Elnes p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “Gifts of the Dark Wood” Eric Elnes p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. “Gifts of the Dark Wood” Eric Elnes p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. From Marcia McFee worship resources for Gifts of the Dark Wood [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. From Marcia McFee worship resources for Gifts of the Dark Wood [↑](#footnote-ref-11)