

Reclaiming Emptiness
Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost
October 14, 2018
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Texts: Job 23.1-9, 16-17;
 Psalm 90;
 Hebrews 4.12-16;
 Mark 10.17-31

We are wading into some deep waters today. Our texts raise big questions that theologians and philosophers and poets have wrestled with for as long as human beings have reflected on life. What do we do with the promise of a good God and the reality of evil in the world? What do we make of Jesus' demand today that this man - who comes before him eager to experience eternal life - must sell everything he has and give it to the poor? And what about this claim from Hebrews that the Word is living and active?

I stopped at that first phrase when I was inviting the children to fall in love with the scriptures as a place where they will meet God. Because the passage, as you no doubt heard, continues to describe this Word as "sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."¹

We saw that piercing in action today as Jesus encountered this young man asking one question on the surface but clearly wrestling with so much more beneath it. That is where I want us to go today. Not to the intellectual questions on the surface but to the wrestling underneath.

How can God be good - all loving and all powerful - and yet have evil exist in the world? There are philosophical arguments attempting to answer that question. You can put the word *theodicy* into google and read to your heart's content.² I've never found a fully satisfying answer to that

¹ Hebrews 4.12, NRSV

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodicy> is not a bad place to get the lay of the theodicy landscape.

theological question. I stand with my theology professor who helped us wade through all the philosophical arguments and then offered this observation: when people who are suffering ask the question of “why” they are not usually looking for an intellectual answer. They are looking for a pastoral response. They are looking for compassion and for someone to crawl with them into the pit and stare down the emptiness that is threatening to consume them.

In the same way, I don't want us to stop at the presenting issue in Mark and argue about whether you can be a person of faith and still have wealth. First of all, it invites the game of relativity: compare us to the abject poverty in certain parts of the world and every single one of us in this room would be considered wealthy. Compare us to the 1% and that may exclude every single one of us in this room. We have really wide margins between us in this room when it comes to wealth. Are we going to find that precise tipping place and say this text applies to you but not to you?

I don't mean to disparage any of these questions. I just want to go beneath the surface of them. In fact, it's only as you go beneath the surface that you can find a thread that connects these teachings in Mark. We heard the opening of Mark chapter 10 last Sunday when some Pharisees who are trying to trick Jesus and expose him as a fool ask whether a man can divorce his wife. Jesus puts the question back to them and asks what Moses commanded. They respond that Moses does allow a man to give his wife a certificate of divorce. Jesus then goes beneath the legal code and points to the deeper intention of God in creation and calls all us (whether married, divorced, single, or remarried) to get serious about our relationships and what abiding love, profound mutuality, and enduring faithfulness really look like in all the complexity that is human relationships.

The next story is about little children being brought to Jesus. When the disciples try to push them off as unimportant, Jesus was *indignant*. Mark shows us the human flashes of emotion in Jesus and this was one where he was furious with them. And once again he takes the opportunity to teach what it takes to live in God's realm. You must enter knowing that you have no more power or privilege than a small child.

It is here that Jesus encounters the young man from our text today asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus looks at him with love and then proceeds to do what the book of Hebrews warns about an encounter with God's Word. He pierces through the presenting conversation about the law to reveal to this young man where he really needs to wrestle. This isn't an ethical teaching about wealth any more than the conversation with the Pharisees was really about divorce.

What Jesus is pressing for in all of these stories is a radical and profound trust in God. And then to let that trust play out in such a way that every form of false security is set aside, and every power you wield or privilege enjoy is held with wide open hands ready to be set aside for the sake of the least of these.

It *is* hard for the wealthy to enter because delusions of control are possible when you have wealth in a way they are not when you are poor. But it isn't the balance in your checkbook that matters here. It's about where you place your trust. And Jesus recognized that this young man needed to empty his checkbook out in order to be laid bare before God to wrestle with these questions.

I want to return to one of those intellectual questions that sit on the surface of our texts today. The book of Job ultimately does level a theological critique against the tradition of his day. It questions the concept of retributive justice where God doles out punishment for wrong doing and rewards good behavior with blessing. The same simplistic theology that led the eager young man to Jesus's feet. But the way the book of Job goes about that critique is to wrestle with the question of suffering not for an abstract, theological perspective but a personal one. The book of Job (whether it is about a historical person or not) is born from the experience of sitting in the painful empty places when all comfort and security is gone. Where the questions are coming fast and furious and certainty is like a mist that disappears the moment that you grasp for it. It's a painful place but also a spiritually powerful place.

When I entitled this sermon "Reclaiming Emptiness" I did so with some trepidation. Because the kind of emptiness I want us to reclaim is the kind

where we relinquish all of the false security, all the noise, and the siren calls that stop us from having to wrestle with whatever it is that is keeping us from a profound trust in God. And, yes, for many of us, we do not face that emptiness without some kind of loss that forces us to go there.

Here is where I want to offer 15 footnotes about what I do NOT mean by this idea of reclaiming emptiness. I will limit it to two footnotes and choose them by the month we are in and the experiences we keep having as a community.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness month; tomorrow I am going to Western Seminary to talk with students about this very topic. I want to be very clear that when I advocate reclaiming emptiness I am not talking about being stuck in an abusive situation. I'm not advocating passivity in the face of oppression. The prophets were fierce in their call to stand up against all forms of oppression. Jesus was unequivocal and tireless in his efforts to relieve suffering and confront abuses of power. If you are feeling empty because you are being beaten down, that is *not* the kind of emptiness that I mean. That's footnote number 1.

Footnote number 2: if you wake up day after day feeling depressed or anxious...unable to function ...not wanting to engage in life. Feeling like your life is so empty you do not want to live anymore - that is *not* the kind of emptiness that I mean...the kind that comes from neurotransmitters not functioning the way they should. If this describes you then I want you to get support today, to stay on your meds, and do whatever you can to get out from under that kind of emptiness.

The kind of emptiness I *do* mean is the kind where we stop posturing. Where we get honest about our fears and our mistakes, our weaknesses and our needs. Where we stop running around all the time like our frantic busyness is going to save the world or finally make us good enough. Where we take stock of who is benefitting from all of our investments of time or money and who is being overlooked or left behind. Where we welcome the piercing of soul from spirit and even the judgment of God because we recognize that God's judgment is not about doling out punishments and rewards but about looking at us with love to chase us out

of the shadows and into the light so that we can be changed and made useful and ready for the work of God's realm.

I have a piece of a reading that was shared with me a month ago that brings to life with beautiful imagery and metaphor this call to reclaim emptiness. I want to share it with you now as we close. I have copies of this reading on the welcome desk if you find you'd like to take it with you. It comes from *The Reed of God* by Caryll Houselander:

“It is emptiness like the hollow in the reed, the narrow riftless emptiness, which can only have one destiny: to receive the piper's breath and to utter the song that is in the piper's heart.

The reed grows by the streams. It is the simplest of things, but it must be cut by the sharp knife, hollowed out, and the stops must be cut in it; it must be shared and pierced before it can utter the shepherd's song. It is the narrowest emptiness in the world, but the little reed utters infinite music...

All life has emptiness at its core....It is the quiet hollow reed through which the wind of God blows and makes the music that is our life.”

Thanks be to God!