



Proper 21, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A man heads to the racetrack hoping to turn his last \$50 into enough pay to his rent for the month. Just before the first race he sees a priest blessing one of the horses, a real long shot that he knew would pay off big if it won, so he figured “what the heck, a priestly blessing can’t hurt” and bet all his money on that horse. And sure enough, it won. The man was elated and even more excited when he saw the same priest blessing a different horse in the second race. So he bet all his winnings on that horse and won big again.

When it came to the third race he bet again on the horse that the priest blessed, but this time the horse came in dead last, two whole furlongs behind the others. Furious the man stormed down to the track and found the priest, “what happened? The other horses that you blessed did great!” And the priest said, “you must be an atheist since you obviously can’t tell the difference between a simple blessing and last rites!”

Sometimes it’s hard to tell what’s happening when events are viewed from a distance. To connect to today’s readings from the scriptures, we might think of Jesus’ death on the cross as another example. To the average person in Jerusalem the day it happened it probably looked like just another criminal being put to death, but Paul tells us in our reading today from Philippians that something much deeper and more profound was taking place.

In Jesus’ death the humiliation of God was being brought to completion. Paul tells us that the divine Son, the second person of the Trinity, had humbled himself – setting aside the power and freedom of divinity to take on weakness and servitude as a human being. And that humbling, that humiliation, reached its deepest place in the cross.

The phrase that Paul uses in verse 7 to describe what the Son of God did in becoming human is an interesting one. Paul says that Christ “emptied himself.” The Greek word that is used here is the word “kenosis.” That word has taken on great significance in Christian spirituality over the centuries since Paul first used it to

describe Christ. In Christian spirituality the word “kenosis” has taken on powerful significance as a way to describe what it means for us to follow Christ.

Kenosis, in its simplest sense, means that we let go of all the things that can distract us from being who God created us to be so that we create space in our lives for God to make us into the people he intends us to be. Kenosis means that we empty ourselves of things that hinder our walk with God and allow God to fill us up with things that help our walk. As Christ emptied himself of divine power to become human and die, so we empty ourselves of whatever hinders us from knowing God more deeply. And likewise, as God raised the emptied Christ from the dead and filled him with divine power once more, so also will God raise us up out of our emptiness and fill us with new life in Christ.

Let’s think about what all this means in very practical terms. Let me offer you some concrete illustrations of what kenosis looks like.

One of the primary ways of practicing kenosis is by intentionally entering into silence. We set aside time each day to turn off the TV, to silence our phones, and sit quietly. In doing so we empty our minds of many of the distractions of daily life and create a space in which we can begin to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking into our souls.

Another way to practice kenosis is to go out of our way to help others. Sometimes it is easy to help someone – I’m going to the store anyway, I can pick up something for you if you need me to. Those occasions aren’t really kenosis. To empty myself, as Christ emptied himself, I really need to practice helping others when it is out of my way, inconvenient, and annoying. That is when I have actually begun to empty myself in a way that looks like Christ.

We also practice kenosis when we set aside the need to be right. In an argument with a spouse, in a dispute at work, or in a political debate with a friend, we can often become frustrated or even angry as we attempt to prove to the other person that we know what we’re talking about and they need to see things our way. This is where the Pharisees were in today’s story from the gospel – trying to prove themselves right and Jesus wrong. Notice, however, that Jesus doesn’t feel he needs to prove anything. He is empty of his own self-importance and filled with the love that he knows God has for him.

And that is what all three of these examples of kenosis have in common: we have emptied ourselves of our own sense of self-importance and allowed ourselves to be filled with the love that God has for us. When I

am silent, I can hear God telling me I am loved instead of the TV or the phone telling me I am important. When I go out of my way to help others, I can see how God loves me instead of reinforcing in myself the idea that I'm too important to give up my time and effort for others. When I give up the need to be right in an argument, I can see that God loves me whether I get things right or get them wrong instead of thinking that I need to win in order to be safe or loved or accepted.

At this point we might reasonably ask why kenosis matters. Why should I have to empty myself of my own sense of self-importance and be filled instead with God's love? Why is that the way to become who God created me to be? To explain why, let's stop for a moment and think about who God is. God is the loving relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How can three persons exist in intimate communion as one God? It only happens because each person of God has space within his own existence in which the other persons of God may dwell. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "I am *in* the Father and the Father is *in* me."

This God of intimate communion created us in his image and adopted us into his life through Christ. We exist for relationship with God and with each other. To be who God created us to be we have to have space in our lives for God to dwell and we have to have space in our lives for others – our family, our friends, our neighbors – to dwell with us in our lives.

Kenosis is how we create that space. By emptying ourselves of our own self-importance, as Christ emptied himself of his divine power, we create a space within ourselves where God can live in us and we can live in God. We create a space within ourselves where other people can live in us and we live in them, sharing the kind of loving communion we created to experience.

This is one of the lessons of the parable that we heard today. Both the vineyard owners' sons were asked by their Father to practice kenosis. Their Father asked them to empty themselves of some of their own self-importance in order to be in relationship with him – and with each other – in the work of the vineyard. Both sons resisted this kenosis because it is hard to do. It is difficult to be crucified with Christ. But in the end, the second son was finally able to do it and in doing so he took a huge step towards deeper and more loving relationship.

And there is one other lesson that this parable teaches us about kenosis. It reminds us that we do not have to seek out special opportunities to empty ourselves of our self-importance and allow the life of God and of others to become part of who we are. God has designed the world to create these opportunities. Having par-

ents, having children, being married, having friends, holding a job, being in a church, living in a community – all the normal things of life will create endless opportunities for us to empty ourselves and be filled with God and relationships with others.

Like the two sons in the parable we don't have to seek out kenosis, it will come to us. Our calling is to be ready when it comes. Our invitation from God is to be prepared to say "yes" when the chance comes to empty ourselves of distraction and self-absorption and be filled with God's love. May we be given the grace to say "yes" when those times come.

Amen.