



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

17th Sunday after Pentecost: Sept. 27, 2020

Sermon Title: "Empty"

Sermon Text: Philippians 2:1-13 and Matthew 21:23-32

Why does it seem like everyone is so angry these days? Have you noticed it in others? Have you noticed it in yourself? Much of it's rooted in the pandemic and all the restrictions and change we've had to endure. We know it's been necessary; it's a way of loving our neighbor; but it hasn't been easy. We mourn what we've lost and sacrificed. So sometimes we get angry. And most times anger is accompanied by its companion, fear.

This trend toward an angrier, more frightened society began long before the coronavirus. I understand why; our political system is broken, science is under siege, facts have become optional, and hypocrisy reigns. But our anger and fear has made us less patient and gracious. We don't listen anymore. Instead, each day we draw deeper lines in the sand. You're with me or you're against me. No compromise. No surrender. No exceptions. Our anger and fear seem most toxic in our online interactions. Shielded by a keyboard, a screen, and sometimes even a fictitious name, we convey all manner of nastiness – things we'd rarely if ever say in-person. It's the bitter fruit of hearts that have become angry and afraid.

Anger and fear are both on full display in today's Gospel. On the surface, it appears that the chief priests and elders are quarreling with Jesus on the subject of *authority*. Their question was important. But deep down, the chief priests and elders already knew but didn't want to admit that Jesus did indeed possess the fullness of God's authority. So why then were they angry? Why then were they afraid? Well, because if *Jesus* had authority, they would lose *theirs*. They would become *powerless*.

I believe this is why *we* feel so angry and afraid. Especially in this pandemic, we feel *powerless*. Constant change. Constant uncertainty. It's all beyond our control. Of course that makes us angry and afraid.

If there was ever a moment in Jesus's life when he had every right to feel powerless, out of control, angry, and afraid, it was three hours on a Friday afternoon as he hung on a cross, waiting to die. There's a painting by a French artist named James Tissot that I love to contemplate. It's called "What Our Lord Saw from the Cross." From the vantage point of the cross, we see people laughing at Jesus, mocking him, and celebrating his impending death. We see bored Roman soldiers, eager for this miserable job to end. And in the foreground, we see those who are dearest to Jesus: Mary Magdalene, John the Beloved Disciple, and his own mother, Mary. They cry in anguish and disbelief as they watch Jesus die.

It's so painful to see. Yet the cross constituted the *culmination* of Jesus's ministry and mission. The one with the greatest power and authority in all the cosmos willingly surrendered *everything*. In doing so he won the ultimate victory over sin and death for the salvation of humanity. In our second lesson, Paul described it this way: *Jesus emptied himself*.

In his birth as a vulnerable little baby, Jesus became *empty*, out of love. As he blessed and healed some of the very people who would one day turn against him, he became *empty*, out of love. As he submitted to the mocking and torture of his opponents, he became *empty*, out of love. And as he died a painful death on the cross, he became *empty*, out of love.

Paul teaches us that at its core, Christian discipleship is about assuming the mindset of Jesus, and becoming empty of all the things that impede our unity with Christ and with one another. Paul's entire ministry was a quest to become empty so that he might be filled with Christ alone.

At this particular time, how is Jesus calling us to become empty? I believe he's calling us to empty ourselves of our pride, our self-worship, and our tendency to prioritize nearly everything in life *other* than Jesus. In becoming empty we acknowledge that there is anger and fear we cannot *banish* on our own, problems we cannot *solve* on our own, and weaknesses we cannot *heal* on our own. That's tough in this culture that so values and exalts the independent, self-made person. But the way of Jesus is to become *empty* so that *we* can be filled with Christ alone.

A young man in Colorado named Garrett¹ had experienced a crisis of faith after a stint in a church that discouraged questions and mandated obedience. Feeling lost, he asked some cloistered nuns if he could stay a while to wrestle with his anger. After he arrived, he "ranted and raved" about how he didn't know if he believed anymore, or if he even wanted to believe. One of the nuns, Sister Scholastica, asked what chores he'd like to do while staying there. He said "anything but doing dishes." And so she said, "Good, then you will do the dishes. And...when you are doing the dishes, listen to God speaking. Find God in the dishes - it's more important than doctrine and theology, which seem to upset you."

After a month of this, Garrett was frustrated. God seemed so absent. As his complaints grew, Sister Scholastica said, "Brother Garrett, you talk so very much. Do you know how to listen?" And so he tried to pray more and be more silent so he could boast about his progress and prove the sister wrong. But instead, he only became angrier. One day, Sister Scholastica said "We should continue to listen to God. Follow me." She led him to the cloister's mortuary. Outside the door, she whispered, "A sister passed away last night." Garrett said he was sorry. "Yes, it is sad. Now, Brother Garrett, let's not be so selfish anymore. Go pray for your sisters." He pushed through the door, and there rested a corpse with two sisters sobbing over it. He sat praying until they asked, "Would you like to know who she was?" For an afternoon, he listened and prayed for them.

By the end of summer, the dish washing became tolerable and Garrett grew accustomed to silence. On their final walk, the sister asked him, "What is God teaching you?" He said, "God's teaching me to join the life of the church if I want to change it; God's showing me to

appreciate others' views on Christ while seeking what I truly believe... and God is granting me peace from my noisy, untamed heart." She smiled. "Brother Garrett, you still have much to learn, but you have done very well. Perhaps you would enjoy doing the dishes twice a day?"

For Garrett, washing dishes, silence, and praying with grieving friends were the unlikely but very sacred tasks that emptied him of his anger, his frustration, his pride, and his fear. And in that newly created open space in Garrett's heart, Jesus Christ poured his peace, a peace that's beyond our understanding, a peace which enables one to take the first tentative steps to follow the cross. What is Jesus inviting you to empty from *your* heart so that you can acquire *his* mind, *his* peace, and walk in *his* ways? And what other beautiful things might Jesus pour into that sacred empty space?

Friends, these are challenging times. Of course we feel powerless, angry, and afraid. It's understandable that we might seek solutions, solace, and even salvation through big, dramatic means. But perhaps today Jesus will come to you in a very quiet and simple way because of a new and beautiful empty space in your heart, formed during a time of silence, a moment of prayer, or maybe even while you wash the dishes. This isn't about retreating from the world. Continue passionately working for truth, justice, and the wellbeing of your neighbor. But as you do so, and as you navigate this pandemic mess, don't lose yourself. Let go of anger, fear, and prideful self-reliance. Become *empty*, and be filled with Christ alone. Cling to Christ... and be at peace. Amen.

Citations:

¹ January 22, 2014 *Christian Century* magazine