

Homily – The Servant Song

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Today I start with a story of a cancelled flight canceled. I was visiting my daughter and woke up early to head to the airport. Before leaving the house I received both a text and an email saying that my flight had been cancelled, and I had been rebooked on the same flight two days later. I have to say that I have never before experienced a forty-eight-hour delay, and while I might have enjoyed the extra time with my daughter, I had no way to know if the flight two days later would be cancelled once again. After waiting thirty-five minutes I finally got through to a telephone customer service person, and we started the dance of getting me home.

I'm guessing that most of you have done this dance. You press your case against a bureaucracy or machine that is more concerned with money than customer service. And, as New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote, we live in a day and age in which "the only way not to be a victim is to be venomous." Do you sometimes feel like this phrase represents these times that we live in? "The only way not to be a victim is to be venomous." I have to say that this makes me squirm. Do I really need to be venomous with the airline customer service rep? Do I really need to take on the role of victim of the airline or is there another way? This is a little bit of a leading question, because I certainly believe there is another way.

Today, I want to arm you with yet another tool for a healthy spiritual life. And, our guide to this tool is going to be the words of Paul that we heard this morning in his New Testament letter to the Philippians.

The Apostle Paul is a wonderful spiritual guide to us – both as individuals and also as communities of people that are trying to following the ways of Jesus. Paul seems to have a deep understanding of how we tick, and also he recognizes the things that make us stumble. And, in his writings that we heard today, Paul says "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

No matter where you are in your spiritual journey, these words of wisdom should ring true. Great and greater spiritual health is achieved when we get outside of our selves. We draw closer to God and to others when we can let go of our egos, when we can diminish our need to control, and when we stop making everything about us.

Now, as I say these words to you, I know they are true, but I still don't find them easy to do. And, I think part of the reason that I struggle is because when I let go of my ego or my need to control then I feel like a door mat. I feel like I will just be taken advantage of and that makes my sense of self feel diminished. I think this was part of my problem with my airline experience. Do any of you feel like this as well? Does letting go make you feel diminished?

I think this is a normal feeling since asserting one's needs or even beliefs is a core part of healthy self-esteem. In his book, "The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem", Nathaniel Branden writes about the importance of self-assertiveness. Using his words... "Self-assertiveness means honoring one's wants, needs, and values and seeking appropriate forms of their expression. Its opposite is a timid surrender in which you consign yourself to a perpetual underground where everything that you are lies hidden or stillborn. In this way we avoid confrontation with someone whose values differ from ours. We are able to please, placate, or manipulate someone, or we are able to simply "belong."

Now, to practice self-assertiveness consistently one needs the conviction that one's ideas and wants are important. Unfortunately, this conviction is often lacking. When we were young, many of us received signals conveying that what we thought, felt, or wanted was not important. We were taught, in effect, what's important is what others want. And, perhaps we were intimidated by accusations of selfishness when we attempted to stand up for ourselves. It often takes courage to honor what we want and to fight for it. For many people, self-surrender and self-sacrifice are far easier. However, healthy self-assertiveness is important.

Some of you may have a sense of relief in hearing that you don't need to be a door mat. You may have a sense of comfort and nod your head at the healthy practice of self-assertiveness. Today's Gospel reading didn't show Jesus bowing to the will of the chief priests and elders. Instead, he refused to answer their questions. I think it is safe to say that Jesus was never a doormat. He practiced healthy self-assertiveness, but in a way that did not feed his ego.

And, others of you here today may be squirming because you are convicted that letting go of self is important. Repeating the earlier words of Paul. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit... Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." There is a tension, isn't there, between the self-assertiveness of healthy self-esteem and the selflessness we hear about from Paul. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." And here is

my attempt to live into that tension between healthy self-assertiveness and selflessness.

Today's reading from Philippians is a beautiful poem. In it, Paul recognizes that Jesus had only one "operational mode." Everything he did, he did by self-emptying. He emptied himself and descended into human form. And he emptied himself still further ("even unto death on the cross") and fell through the bottom to return to the realms of dominion and glory. In whatever life circumstance, Jesus always responded with the same motion of self-emptying—or to put it another way, with the same motion of *descent*: going lower, taking the lower place, not the higher. In this way he is our exemplar. Jesus is a person and, at the same time, a process. Jesus is the Son of God, but he is also "the Way", the way of the cross. He's the goal and the means. For all authentic spiritual teachers, like Jesus, their message is the same as their life; their life is their message. Jesus is the living icon of the whole journey we are called to walk.

Kenosis, which means "letting go" or "self-emptying," is clearly the way of Jesus, and I believe all great spirituality is about letting go. Yet many associate letting go with Buddhism more than with Christianity. Sadly, Christianity seems to have become more about "saving your soul" or what some now call "spiritual capitalism. The cultural ideal of the Western industrialized world is the self-made, self-sufficient, autonomous individual who stands by himself or herself, not needing anyone else, and not beholden to anyone for anything. This is the ideal that people live and work for. It is their goal in life, and they will sacrifice anything to achieve it. In our American culture this is how you discover your identity. And, there have been plenty of people in the past with inflated egos—kings, conquerors, and other dictators, but in the Western world today the cultivation of the ego is seen as the ideal for everyone. Individualism permeates almost everything we do. It is a basic assumption. It is like a cult. We worship the ego.

However, as followers of Jesus we are called to do the opposite. For you see, to empty the self is not an act of denial, but of fulfillment, for it creates space for God to fill one's being. At our best, we are satisfied by nothing less than God; our deepest desire is to be one with God, even as Jesus was. Made in the image of God, our destiny is to become one with God, so that we too can say, not my will but God's be done. This is not a loss, but again, the greatest gain. We surrender ourselves over to God.

Now, this surrender, this emptying, this letting go is not easy and that is why we need to practice it so that it becomes an authentic part of who we are. Every Friday afternoon, here at St. Barnabas, we offer a spiritual practice called Centering Prayer. I should point out that sometimes our Centering Prayer is offered online and sometimes it is in person. This coming Friday it will be on Zoom.

And, in Centering Prayer, the letting go of thoughts is key for it helps us consent to the presence and action of God. This letting go in Centering Prayer carries that core sense of “Not my will but thine be done, O God,” the words uttered by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. And it should come as no surprise that recent neuroscience suggests that learning to let go of what we’re clinging to, mentally as well as emotionally, actually catalyzes some revolutionary and evolutionary changes in our neural wiring.

Now, the usual explanations given for why we let go of all thoughts in Centering Prayer have to do with “making yourself empty so that you can be filled with God.” I think this is an important benefit to this spiritual practice. In addition the emptying out of Centering Prayer allows us to let go of the clutter and preoccupations that fill our minds so that we can see the beauty of God that already surrounds us.

However, I think there is another key reason to do Centering Prayer. Yes, it helps us to achieve some desired result, but the releasing itself is the full meaning of this contemplative practice. Every time a stray thought creeps in again, we have another chance to release the thought and let go. It is the letting go which is the very essence of “putting on the mind of Christ.” With Centering Prayer, each time you manage to disengage from a thought, you are doing so in solidarity with Jesus’ own kenotic stance and in the process patterning that stance more and more deeply into your being until it eventually becomes your default response to all life’s situations.

And, here is one last point about the emptying out of Centering Prayer. Have you ever watched really closely what happens when you release a thought? Yes, in most cases more thoughts come rushing back in. But notice how there is a slight gap between them; if only for a nanosecond, there occurs a moment when you are present and alert, but in which your attention is focused on no particular thing. You are briefly in a state of objectless awareness. This fleeting taste in the gap between thoughts is of a whole different bandwidth of consciousness. If you stay with these moments of objectless spaciousness, they will open up a whole new approach to your own spiritual evolution.

So, this coming week, I invite you to live into the tension between self-assertiveness and selflessness. You are not a victim when your flight is canceled. Instead, you roll with the punches in a way that is authentic to your new true self. Whether it is Centering Prayer or some other mode, I invite you to follow the lead of Jesus and surrender, let go, and embrace emptiness. In this way can put on the mind of Christ as we fall into oneness with God.