



University Christian Church  
(Disciples of Christ)  
Austin, Texas

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## Emptying

Phil. 2:1-8

Sept. 28, 2008

Becca and I just returned to Austin last night from a whirlwind trip to Baltimore for Becca's cousin's wedding, to NYC where I had registered to participate in a Workshop on Spiritual Direction at Union theological Seminary, right next to Riverside Church, had some time to visit with our son, David, there and then on to Kalamazoo where our daughter, Marie, was performing in the bawdy production, *A Chorus Line*...carrying on our family tradition of acting.

Last time I said that here, I launched into my one foray into acting, but the truth is that Becca's brother Marshall truly is an actor. In the 30 years since I've known him Marshall has been in innumerable plays in various community theatres in the Chicago area.

Somewhere along the way, Marshall's niece, our Marie, caught the bug, too. I remember one particularly powerful presentation of the George Bernard Shaw play, **Major Barbara**, a jaunty yet bitter journey into the weapons production industry of pre-WWI Europe. Marie was too young to catch much of the biting humor that Shaw interlaced throughout the play, but Marie's great grandmother on my side, Mimi, made Shaw's cutting humor seem somewhat tame. All of us who knew who Mimi were at one time skewered by her biting wit that usually felt more biting than wit.

At any rate, Mimi notwithstanding, it is the British who are the masters of

the put-down, the dig, the insult. And two of the best wielders of the cutting remark were George Bernard Shaw, himself, born in Ireland but later a man of the cosmopolitan world, and Winston Churchill, whose granddaughter you may have seen because she just completed her Public Broadcast System series on the adventures and exploits of that English hero. Both Shaw and Churchill were absolute artists at the cutting remark, with an acid burn that would simmer for quite a time.

Once Shaw was invited to tea by a woman who was one of those pestering high society types who liked to get close to celebrities and then later on be able to drop their names. She sent Shaw a card that said: "Lady So-and-So will be at home Thursday between 4:00 and 6:00," her subtle invitation for him to come calling. Shaw's response was not so subtle: "Mr. Bernard Shaw, likewise." That is, at his home, not hers!

But cigar chomping Winston Churchill, the English variety of the Brits, was also hard to top. Do you remember that exchange between Churchill and Lady Astor who said, "Mr. Churchill, if I were your wife I'd poison your tea." Churchill's quick and acerbic response, "Madame, if I were your husband, I'd drink it."

And with our daughter, Marie's, Chorus Line opening night just last week, how could I not remind you of the Superbowl of insults, the World Series of the put down.... exchanged when the master Shaw sends a note to another master of the cutthroat, Churchill. Shaw included two tickets for his brand new play to Churchill: "These are two tickets for the opening night of my new play, one for you and one for a friend, if you have one."

Churchill sent the tickets back with this note: "I cannot attend the opening night. Send two tickets for the next night, if there is one."<sup>i</sup>

When we step back and take a more nuanced look at this verbal sparring, we find something else going on. We find people, Churchill, Shaw, my grandmother, some of your friends, and, let's face it, sometimes we find ourselves, engaging in a verbal jousting that isn't just for entertainment. It has a purpose. And the deeper purpose is for the victor of the joust to be able to stand taller, and to leave the field of contest with higher status than the vanquished. The purpose is to lift us up by putting the other person down.

Before I go on to look at this any deeper, let me just ask you to recognize in your world, in our world, nearly everywhere we turn this same ethic is in effect.

>Several of you in your workplace might be eligible to be promoted to a higher level within your organization. Only one will be. There is all the organizational grist necessary for a bruising intraoffice struggle. The most capable person may not rise. The best inside fighter may well.

>Consider what's going on in a courtroom. One side wins, another loses. Sometimes Justice, itself, is one of the losers.

>Consider several companies bidding on a big, new job. Only one wins.

>Consider a young woman weighing merits of several suitors. Only one wins,

>and we are a culture that teaches our children to strive mightily to overcome whatever stands between them and their becoming that lone victor.

Only one wins... and, as Vince Lombardi, former coach of the Green Packers once famously said of football, but true of much of our cultural life, "Winning isn't everything. It is the ONLY thing."

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How different an attitude, a mind-set we find in our reading from Philippians this morning. Remember the Apostle Paul's words:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
2:6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.”

Emptying himself, not in winning, Jesus became for us the model of how to live as a Christian. The Greek word for this emptying is KENOSIS, and the kenotic understanding of Jesus has been more important than you may know.

You may be surprised to hear that for many Christians this little passage from Philippians has become the answer for how Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine. You see, it was his readiness, in this view,

- >his readiness to shed every privilege and accoutrement of his godly power,
- >his readiness to lose himself totally in obedience to God,
- > that Jesus finally overcame the limits of human nature that had circumscribed him, and
- > in his ready willingness to always follow the will of God...no matter what... Jesus found the ultimate freedom.

>>>>For once emptied of selfish motivation, Jesus could be full of God.

We who claim Jesus as our Christ, our Leader, can learn from Jesus that the path forward is not one of collecting every accolade, every award, every title, every promotion.... so that we might have high status in the eyes of our peers, or even that personal satisfaction of having spent ourselves wisely.

No, the way forward is by following Jesus' example of

emptying....emptying.

Some have misunderstood this kind of humility Jesus represents as some renunciation of our value, or personhood. They use it to buttress a “doormat theology” where Christians should devalue themselves (even though the Scriptures are clear that God highly values us) and that we should submit ourselves to our husband, our boss, or our President, when the Scriptures clearly teach us that God alone is worthy of our devotion and God alone is the authority in our lives.

When presented with this doormat theology, we must emphasize that in context that is clearly not what Paul intended for us here. His Philippian Christian friends had grown up in a culture not that different from our own in its emphasis on striving, struggling, and then rising to the top of the achievement ladder. This striving had even begun to infect the way that the Christian community – which should have known better- treated each other.

The Philippians had heard of Jesus’ teaching:

10 But when you are invited [to a banquet], go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (*Luke 14:10-11*)

But in the Philippian Church, there was a lack of loving concern for one another as they became more aware of their positions in the church order and began to wrestle with one another for status.

It is in this circumstance that Paul says:

3 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.

Are you shocked that there would be struggle within the church for status, for position? Well let me take you one step even further. When the ministers of our churches are in seminary studying for the ministry, one the great challenges almost all of us faced were our preaching classes. Now, classes are small enough that everybody knows everybody, and you've already sized up your classmates' mental capacity, study habits, and you've even got a pretty good sense of the spiritual depth of each person who climbs into the pulpit of the chapel on campus to deliver a sermon to a jury of his or her peers.

And the court analogy is *apropos* because you feel on trial. There's:

- the prof. who knows 20 times what you'll ever know about preaching;
- your classmate who may well try to get back for the gaff you pointed out that she'd made in Church History class;
- and, of course, the class malcontent who's greatest joy in life is whittling everyone else down to size.
- The general rule of thumb in the evaluation was, the better the preaching skill of the evaluator, the harsher the criticism you could expect from him or her when they heard your sermon.

So you work hard to prepare that sermon. You make sure that it is theologically sound, that it is clear and to the point, and that it conveys your most profound thoughts with the very best you can give it. By the time you climb into that pulpit, you've convinced yourself that afterwards you should probably go right out and get this jewel of a sermon published!

But a scant hour later, by the time your presentation and your evaluation

session is over, you are just as sure that it is time to explore some other profession!

I've heard similar stories of the preaching classes at Union Theological Seminary in NYC where Becca and I stayed earlier this week with a professor friend there. Gary Dorrien's apartment is literally in the shadow of the 22 story bell tower of the Riverside Church, constructed by John D. Rockefeller, in order to lure the most noted mainline Protestant preacher of that day, Harry Emerson Fosdick. Rockefeller's plan worked, and the pinnacle of the preaching of the day proceeded from that Riverside Pulpit. And since Harry Emerson Fosdick had been a graduate of Union, naturally he was invited to teach preaching to its classes of students next door.

Can you imagine being a student there then, having the very dean of American preachers sitting before you as you preached your first sermon? Can you imagine the rivers of sweat that were spent in preparation and the heart stopping anxiety that preceded the time of evaluation that followed?

But Fosdick, certainly one of the greatest preachers of all time emptied himself of the aura of power he might have claimed, he entered into the world of the petrified student, who most certainly would have thanked God, when he heard the words from Fosdick to the rest of the class, "What can we say to Mr. Jones that will be of help to him?"<sup>iii</sup> Kenosis. Self-emptying... in order to serve.

Three and a half years ago, Becca and I were driving her mother, Marie, from her apt. in Sarasota to the hospice in Kalamazoo where she would spend her last months with us before her cancer took her from us. That cool February morning in south Georgia, as we were moving north up I-75, Marie read the road sign that said that Plains, GA, the home of ex-President Jimmy Carter, was 45

miles to the west. Marie muttered that she'd always wanted to stop there. So in an uncharacteristically spontaneous moment, I suggested and then convinced her that now would be a good time to visit.

So we rolled into tiny Plains, Ga, and visited the Carter's school that now has become his and Rosalynn's museum. So quaint, so small town... that I wasn't surprised later to hear of a visitor to the Carter's Maranatha Baptist Church there, who returned with a church bulletin with notices, like our own, including these that "Rosalynn Carter will clean the church next Saturday. Jimmy Carter will cut the grass and trim the shrubbery." Kenosis. Self-emptying.

Our road to peace with God.

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<sup>i</sup> These Shaw and Churchill stories were found in a wonderful sermon by Mark Trotter in the collection *Best Sermons #1*, in the sermon “The Sure Sign of Status.”

<sup>ii</sup> This story also comes from “The Sure Sign of Statue.”