

GOD IS AT WORK IN YOU

“The time has come, the walrus said,” but then time is always coming – and going. And what we think the time is for – what we decide to use it for – is always a fascinating subject, for good or ill ... or waste. Do I ever waste time? It’s harder to tell than some people think, isn’t it? Sometimes we work ourselves down to the bone, as we say, and nothing much comes of it. Sometimes we stare at the ocean or muse in a garden somewhere and appear to be doing nothing whatsoever for hours, or even days, and we come away healed, restored, inspired, filled with light and energy for a new season of life and labor. I surely consider some things a waste of time, but there is little we cannot learn from, if we are open to it.

At the turn of the year, we think about time more than usual. Many of us spend extra time considering our past history and planning for the future. I think the pace of life requires far more prayer time, alone time, think-and-ponder time than most people give it. We go back to work from R&R W&E – wasted and exhausted. For many people, the pace of recreation is at least as demanding as the pace of work, until there is no re-creation or recovery left in it. When work is more relaxing and peaceful than play or home life, then something is amiss, don’t you think? Some of the chaos and turmoil of modern life – including breakdowns, depression, divorces, wrong choices, disintegration – are enhanced, if not caused, by the pace people try to keep, especially when there is no Sabbath left in the land.

One of the big blessings people get when they let Jesus into their lives – when they get converted, when they turn will and life over to God – is calmness and peace at the center. When God is in charge of our lives, he does not allow Satan or Satan’s principles to be in charge any longer. God does not allow guilt, chaos, exhaustion, or fear to govern us when he is in control. Our God is a God of wisdom, and love, and peace, and power. People who have given their lives over to the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit no longer have to prove anything, convince people of their worth, or please everybody. What an incredible relief – beyond words to describe! We still feel guilt, fear, and pressure swarming all around us, but they can no longer control us.

Do we dare to turn this axiom around? Are we willing, finally, to see what we are looking at? If chaos and exhaustion still run our lives; if our schedules are frenetic and we are so busy we can hardly see straight;

if there is no peace at the center, or calmness and clarity about who we really are and what we are trying to do; if our choices and priorities do not match this calmness and peace – then it is not somebody else’s fault. It is not the world’s fault. It is not the needs of all the people around us or the demands of mates, bosses, friends, or children. Those are just excuses we use to keep from making any true changes. It is *our* fault! And we do not need to read self-help books or “get a life.” We need to get God – we need to put God at the center of our lives.

Often (and yes, I speak from personal experience), when we are working too hard – expending ourselves for others to the point of a disintegrating weariness and exhaustion – what we think we want is sympathy and maybe some appreciation. Do you know how much good sympathy and appreciation will do, for a life spinning out of control? In such circumstances, sympathy and appreciation will only spur you on to greater idiocies, and sidetrack you even further from the truth. How long before we realize that idols cannot save us? God is the only one who compliments or appreciates us without suggesting or implying that it would be nice if we did even more.

The Good News in this new year is the same as before: Jesus saves. The love of God in Christ Jesus saves us – fills us with the Holy Spirit and turns our lives into a very different plane of reality, a very different awareness of identity and purpose. Only, we have to give up all thought of staying in control and just letting God help us a little. If I pray for God’s help and blessings so that I can do my life a little better – be a better person, help my friends and family better than ever, be more successful in my career – it will do very little good. I may think that it is noble – that surely God will honor such a high-minded request. But such a prayer is too flimsy to last beyond a few days. God will merely wait until I truly want him in my life, and not just as a mascot or a good-luck charm. God will put up with almost anything, but God will not put up with second place. God comes first, or we lose conscious contact. “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” “*I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.*” Or more accurately, a passionate God. The Second Covenant – the New Testament – is even clearer than the First: It is not about rules, or even about behavior. It is about relationship. And we all have to learn to stop whoring around when it comes to our relationship with God.

It is really simple if we let it be. If you form a relationship – a partnership – with someone and they are more intelligent, more powerful, more loving, and more far-seeing than you are, then that requires some adjustments to the “division of labor” between you. We are so used to

relationships with other humans, where we rightly try to find ways to hold up our own end of the relationship. We look for where our strengths can complement the partnership and where our worth can benefit the relationship – and keep things equal, so to speak, or even leave us slightly superior. Trying that with God only leaves us fighting God. *“Not my will but thine be done.”* Some people say it as a cop-out, a way to skip trying to discern God’s will in their lives. But the precept is not just for the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday. It is for who we marry, and when we are fighting with them. It is for when she is really beautiful, but she doesn’t belong to me. It is for when I am talking too much, and saying too little. It is for how I work, and what I am trying to accomplish. It is for everything in my life. If not, then God is not yet God to me.

“Dear Lord, it is a new year, and I have finally figured out the truth of our relationship. You are superior in every way. So You make all the decisions, and I will carry out all the instructions.” Now, that is not where it will end, but that is where it must begin. God loves to teach, and he often puts us in situations and then hands over the reins to see how well we have learned his principles. We call such times “testing.” Often they frighten us at first. But there is a huge difference between willfully taking the bit in our own teeth, and finding that God is testing our wings. One of the biggest differences is the awareness of the “everlasting arms” waiting to catch us if we falter or fail. But you probably don’t want all this detail.

“God is at work in you.” That is the theme of the sermon, and the claim of this passage in Philippians. Only, it is not a blanket statement. It is not true of everyone, nor is it true in all circumstances. So I thought we should start out with a bit of context. The church at Philippi is Paul’s favorite church. That is, the Philippian church is the most loving, most supportive, most responsive of all the churches Paul ever started. He is not above admonishing them to continue growing in their faith, but he loves them and trusts them and has much reason to be appreciative and grateful for them. So it is no idle comment on his part when he says, “God is at work in you.”

It is no accident, either, that I chose this passage to be the text for what I thought would be my last sermon here. I feel toward this church as Paul felt toward the Philippian church. I can say in all honesty that God is at work in you. I wanted to admonish you to go on growing in your faith. And I might have mentioned the thing about *“as in my presence, much more in my absence”* And probably somewhere in that sermon I would have included a last stab at one of my major themes, because some of you still do not get it. It really should not be a major theme, which

is probably why some of you have trouble getting it. But in our day and time, it is a perspective that is critical and crucial, especially in mainline churches. I will not go into it as much today as I would have if this *were* my last sermon, because now I know I will get more chances.

Nevertheless, in summary form: It is *not* the New Testament message that you should love the world in general as yourself. That is the message being taught and preached everywhere in the liberal church. “Neighbor” has been redefined to mean “everybody.” The liberal church has no theology of “church” – no concept of a faith community that is loyal and obedient to the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ. Therefore it has no borders between the church and the world. It constantly calls us to love the world, and continually rails at us for not doing more to solve all the problems of the world.

As one tiny illustration: Most liberal commentaries – most exegesis from the liberal church on this second chapter of the letter to the Philippians – boldly state that Paul is urging the Philippian Christians to give of themselves *for others*. Just a blanket statement. Usually they don’t even add “as Jesus did by going to the Cross.” Jesus is seldom the focus in the liberal church. Doing for others is the focus. (*Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, on the letter to the Philippians.)

The message to “give of yourselves for others” is now so familiar that most of you would not even think to challenge it. It is the Christian Way, and everybody knows it – or thinks they do. We are always guilty for not doing it more and better, and everybody knows that too. So everybody agrees, but everybody also takes it with a grain of salt because the message is generic, ludicrous, and blatantly inapplicable. You can always tell a “prayer of confession” written by the liberal church. The sorrow is about how we did not do more for others. It is never about our relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

Where is the flaw? Part of the flaw is in wanting things to be simple and not wanting to pay attention to details. Jesus died for everybody, so we should love everybody too. What this fails to notice is that Jesus’ death on the Cross is only meaningful and applicable to those who notice – and repent – and respond by giving their lives to Him. The Cross is an invitation to everybody, but everybody does not respond to the invitation. “*Many are called, but few are chosen.*”

Those who *do* respond are called into the church – the *ecclesia*, the faith community – where they attempt to live together the New Life in

Christ Jesus – the New Life in which the Holy Spirit of Jesus is in charge, rather than we ourselves. Obviously then, this faith community is “called out of the world” as a special faith family intended to live with and among each other in ways very different from the world. In part, at least, it is the way this faith family lives that is supposed to draw other people out of the world and into the New Life in Christ Jesus. That is, when others get sick and tired of the world, they will be drawn to the church – not perfect churches, just real churches. Yes, we are called to “preach the Gospel to all the world.” But all the world will not listen. Only a few will, in each generation. Those who respond are called to form communities that demonstrate this Gospel in real life. One of the reasons so much of Christendom in our time is ineffective, stupid, and boring is that so many groups that call themselves Christians demonstrate nothing inside the church that is different in any way from what is going on outside the church. As long as the church sees no distinction between life inside the church and life in the world in general, there will be no excitement about the Christian Faith or the Christian Life, and more and more people will abandon the church as irrelevant, if not worse. That, of course, is exactly what is happening everywhere, and especially with mainline churches.

It would never have occurred to the Apostle Paul that the Philippians should love the world in general. They might invite anybody they found in the world to come into the church – which, by the way, was an invitation to live very differently and on a very different basis, as we have already mentioned. But just to squander time, caring, and resources on the world in general – with no Message attached, no invitation involved, no response expected – that would have been inconceivable to Paul. He doesn’t “make the point,” because it never crossed his mind that anybody would or could have such a misunderstanding. Only Satan could undo the Message and love of the Christian community with such sleight of hand, and in Paul’s time that had not yet happened. The church was too small and still too much the underdog. In any case, generic love is a contradiction in terms, and only modern people enamored of objective thinking could fail to notice the fatal flaw. Nevertheless, Paul’s comments still reveal a different perspective, for those who pay attention.

“[T]he love is to be for one another” – that is, for those within the church at Philippi. (verse 2) *“[L]ook to each other’s interests and not merely to your own.”* (verse 4) Again this is within the faith community. And you *are* to look to your own interests, just not *only* to your own

interests. *“Take to heart among yourselves what you find in Christ Jesus.”* (verse 5)

Paul is inadvertently making the point by the way he thinks and writes, even though he doesn't know it is an issue. But it certainly *is* an issue in our time. You remember what incredible flak and opposition we ran into here as we tried to build up this faith family: We should never spend time, energy, or resources on ourselves; that is selfish, it was said. We should care only for others, try only to help those outside this church – people who will never see the inside of this church. Nothing inside the church matters; people inside the church do not count. The church itself has no life or purpose or reality of its own, except of course to help people outside its fellowship. It is questionable, if not downright unchristian, to think of this as an outpost of Christians trying to live the New Life in Christ, and actually inviting others to come live it with us. Many sincere people said this along the way, and left us because we would not listen. Only, they were wrong. They were mis-taught. Relationship with God in Christ Jesus is more important than helping others and must come first – *or the others will not be helped!* They are not truly helped unless they also come to Jesus and end up in His church – not stuck in a world estranged from God and still living under the tyranny of their own tiny wills.

“Show yourselves innocent and above reproach, faultless children of God in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine as stars in a dark world, and proffer the word of life.” (verse 15) Paul is not confused about what it is like “out there,” or about what the Christian community is supposed to be like, stand for, represent, and offer. Of course, this is much tougher than modern liberal churchism. If we really are supposed to have something to offer and invite people into, then we must pay attention to our relationships *within* the church, to what we really believe, and even to our own personal relationships with Jesus. That is many times more difficult than tossing leftover money, food, or clothes to people we will never know or ever have to relate to.

“God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.... You shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.”

“God is at work in you.” I believe that. I think we are very far from perfect, and I think that in some ways we are only beginning to catch on to what Jesus intends the influence of this faith family to be in this community. Nevertheless, I believe that we have come a long way, and that God is indeed at work in you. I see every reason to expect that this

will continue, and will grow stronger and clearer as we proceed together. Progress, not perfection.

However, there is a prerequisite. God cannot be at work within us, except in very minor ways, unless we want it – want it a lot – and are willing to make any and every change necessary to cooperate. Paul understands this quite clearly. That is why he holds up the role of Jesus as a beacon to the Philippian Christians. It is a thing he does continually, and so well, that we finally built his letters into our canon Scripture. *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”*

It is one of those places where we can barely believe that Paul sees it so clearly and puts it so well. The very thought that we can have the mind of Christ is beyond belief – except by His grace and mercy. But Paul claims it is ours in Christ Jesus. Paul assumes the Preexistent Christ before John ever wrote his amazing Gospel about *“In the beginning was the Word”* Paul reminds us of Jesus’ identity in the realms beyond our comprehension, before He ever came to earth in human form. And then he highlights the most incredible and amazing thing that ever happened on this earth. In a stroke or two, Paul reminds us of all that Jesus did and went through for us – all which reveal principles beyond earthly understanding, and certainly unlike anything our world sees, expects, understands, or will ever emulate ... unless, of course, in the shape of individuals who have been born anew – born of the Spirit – as Jesus was, and as Jesus makes possible for us too.

Despite how succinctly Paul puts it, that is much too much for one sermon. Before we go to our communion meal and to the renewal and rededication of ourselves in this new year, I want to bring before you just one phrase – one phrase that highlights and reveals the prerequisite for God being at work in us: *“Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself”* Though many of His followers claim it for Him, Jesus did not claim equality with God.

It is believable to us that Jesus might count equality with God a thing to be grasped. From our perspective, Jesus’ true identity is so high that He might have claimed it. We even have a doctrine called “The Trinity” which makes such a claim. But that misses the point entirely. The truth is: Jesus is the only one of our kind who *did not* count equality with God

a thing to be grasped. In His wake, and by His grace, we may be learning not to do that too. But the truth is, we and all our kind are constantly counting equality with God a thing to be grasped. It is the core meaning of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Not to belabor the subject, but *that* is what we all start out trying to do with our free will. We all want to run our own lives. Given any chance, we will also try to subtly or not so subtly run a lot of other people's lives as well. We are only trying to help of course, at least from our perspective. Nevertheless, if we want the Christian Life, we not only want the Holy Spirit to guide and direct our own lives, we want the Holy Spirit of Jesus to be guiding and directing other people's lives as well. And that means the Holy Spirit – not us! Christian history is chock-full of evidence that we have been very fuzzy on this precept. Our Christian institutions and leaders, and even our teaching and preaching, have been laced with efforts to run other people's lives for them. Clearly, somebody needs to. Clearly, until a person is obedient to the will and guidance of the Holy Spirit, they make mayhem of their own lives. So in caring, we step in to try and substitute for the Holy Spirit – at least, we say, until the people find and turn their lives over to the Holy Spirit. And will they ever, as long as we or our institutions are running their lives for them?

Oh yes, we all claim equality with God for as long as we can possibly get away with it. Or, more truthfully, we claim superiority to God. One has only to think about the rebellion and disobedience still operable on earth to realize how many of us consider ourselves equal or superior to God.

But Jesus, at least for Himself, canceled that out. HE EMPTIED HIMSELF. There it is, in all its stark reality: The WAY in. The prerequisite. The “Narrow Gate” into the Christian Life.

Paul only alludes to it here. He assumes, I suppose, that by this time his friends know about the baptism of Jesus – the drowning of the old life and the coming up to a new life, a new identity, a new purpose. “*You are my beloved Son.*” They know about the forty days in the wilderness; the wrestling with Satan; the necessity of reworking every method, purpose, goal, desire, ambition, and dream that Jesus had grown up with or been taught. They know about the prayers that directed His choices – where He would go, whom He would heal, whom He would choose for followers. They know that no normal mortal would head into the controversies He chose or fly in the face of authority the way He did, at least not without an army of real soldiers behind Him. And they know about the Cross. “He emptied Himself” is no casual comment or accidental turn of phrase.

HE EMPTIED HIMSELF. Indeed, like nothing we have ever seen before, or since.

That still leave us with the obvious question, if we are followers: Have we emptied ourselves?

If not, then clearly that is our first and most important task in the new year. If not, then nothing else we do will matter very much – not for Jesus or His church, or for His Kingdom. God tries, but God is never very much at work in us until we empty ourselves. It is always tough when there is no room in the inn. We are all famous for trying to let God in without clearing any room for him. To be sure, we all know about God’s knocking at the door. And many of us can attest to our experiences of inviting him in but nothing happened. We threw the door open wide and welcomed him willingly, but left not one square inch of space for him. So he did not come in. But it was his fault, we say. We opened the door.

“Please come in, Dear Lord! Make Yourself at home!” Like, where?! Is there anywhere the Holy Spirit can get a foothold? Any suggestion the Spirit can make that doesn’t run headlong into a dozen pre-commitments or a whole trainload of preconceived notions that we are still carrying, even from childhood, about who we’re supposed to be, what we’re supposed to accomplish, and what we’re supposed to be like? And there is a long list of people we are caring about and trying to care for. God is welcome to make himself at home and make any changes in our lives at all – as long as it doesn’t interfere with any of these preconceived notions or locked-down loyalties and assumptions. Which means we have things safely wrapped up, and nothing God can say or do will make the slightest difference.

What did it mean to Jesus, even early in His baptized life, that He emptied Himself? Did it not rework all of His relationships – with mother, with brothers, with all His friends and neighbors in Nazareth? And that was just for openers! His story is frighteningly clear; we just don’t like to see it. And if we *do* see it, we don’t want to imagine that how He went at it has anything to do with us.

He emptied Himself – to become God’s servant, and our salvation. We empty ourselves, if we want to follow Him: let His Holy Spirit into our lives, and give God a chance to be at work in us too.

So it is the first Sunday in a new year. We come to receive His special meal – to take Him into our own lives and into our own selves afresh. But it will not and cannot happen ... unless we empty ourselves.