

1

Dale walked into my office one day, many years ago while I served another congregation. He had a silly grin on his face while offering me a Diet Coke. The look on his face and the suspicious can made me a bit hesitant to take the soda. I wondered if a coiled-up snake would jump out of the can, or if it had been rigged with some other surprise. As soon as I took the can, I knew what was wrong. I didn't open the can, but ever since that day the soda can has been sitting in my church office.

Without opening the can, why does it seem suspicious to you? Somehow in the canning process, it was never filled. It's empty.

Someone once asked me, "Why do you keep an empty soda can? You will never be able to drink out of it, so why do you keep it? You could at least recycle the aluminum."

I replied, "On days when I feel empty and drained, the can reminds me that I'm not alone, that God's Spirit fills my life. Even though the can was not filled by mistake, God makes no mistakes in filling our lives."

Have you ever had one of those days—a time when you felt empty?

- When the savings account begins to run low, you may feel empty.
- When you're tired from juggling work and raising your children, you may feel exhausted empty.
- When your best friend has betrayed you, you may feel alone and empty.
- When your marriage seems to be falling apart, you may feel scared and empty.
- When your words of prayer seem ineffective and don't make a difference, you may feel spiritually void and empty.
- As we celebrate Mothers' Day, some women may hope their children will call, leaving some moms feeling empty when the phone does not ring.

Even if we forget to recognize them, Moms do a lot behind the scenes of our families, oftentimes never recognized for all they do. Having Mothers' Day once a year invites us to stop and appreciate what our moms do and give them a day off to rest,

2

but for moms of young children, one day may not seem like enough. That was the case with

an overworked mother of three active young boys who was playing in the yard with her boys one afternoon when her neighbor came by to borrow a cup of sugar. One of her boys aimed his play pistol at his mother and yelled, “Bang! You’re dead!”

The mother acted the part perfectly. She took the shot and fell to the ground. When she fell to the ground, she did not get up. Her neighbor waited for her to get up. But she did not get up, so the concerned neighbor rushed over to see if she was hurt from the fall. As the neighbor bent over, the mother opened one eye and whispered, “Shhhhhh. Please don’t give me away. This is the only chance I ever get to rest.”¹

When we feel exhausted and empty, sometimes we wonder where we will find the resources to be refilled. When the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church in Philippi, he too many have felt drained and exhausted, for he remained under arrest, whether in a prison cell or house arrest, unable to travel and visit the churches that he had started. He instead wrote letters, encouraging congregations to

get along with one another. To the church in Philippi he wrote:

If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.²

Paul then inserted a wonderful hymn into his letter, often known as the *kenosis* hymn, for it uses the Greek word ἐκένωσεν (eKENosen), which means “to empty.” Christ emptied himself of power in order to become human, to become like one of us. Although he had an equal status with God, he emptied himself of that power and became a slave, and in doing so, he became humble and obedient to the point of dying on a cross.

If this beautiful hymn of poetic words ended there, with death on a cross, and if that was the end

3

of the story of Jesus, we might not be gathered here this morning to sing. Fortunately the words continue with the celebration of what happened after the death of Jesus: “Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ.”³

This idea seems backward and upside-down, doesn't it? To empty oneself and become a slave results in being filled with God's empowerment? Really? In what seems backward, becoming empty results in one being filled with worthiness.

Oftentimes we do just the opposite: we try to make ourselves important and take control, seek power over others, have the last word, always be right. We often try to avoid feeling empty, for we would rather be filled with many things: filled with food, filled with possessions, filled with control, filled with status.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul suggests that Jesus did just the opposite. He emptied himself. As strange as that may seem, I've found that sometimes it's in the emptiest places of our lives that we find ourselves most open to surprising fullness, for we begin to sense God's Spirit filling us. That was the case with Joan Webb who wrote the book *Meditations for Christians Who Try to Be Perfect*:

Years ago, after I asked God to fill my cup, it seemed, instead, that [God] ate my lunch. As I saw my dreams fade away, I worked harder to hold on and eventually burned out. I wondered where God was and why he let it happen.

Now as I reflect back, I wonder if [God] could not fill my cup because I already had it full with my personal agenda. I wanted to accomplish great things for God, but I had my own ideas. Perhaps [God] was waiting for me to empty the unusable contents [in order to] pour in [God's] plan.

When we admit our need and ask God for help, it is like emptying our life cups. Emptiness, though uncomfortable, is a necessary prerequisite to filling.

④

Our overflowing cups yield anxiety. God's portion produces security.⁴

It's difficult to empty ourselves, isn't it? To trust that God will fill our lives. To empty ourselves doesn't mean we become irresponsible and give up on life, and to empty ourselves does not mean we stop caring for our lives or one another. To empty ourselves involves taking time to sense God's presence while making decisions, to trust that in the changes that occur in life, God will guide us. Emptying ourselves means we don't need to be in control, we don't need to always be right. Instead of claiming power over others, we share power with one another.

In the church, emptying ourselves means we strive to live in peace with one another. Even when we don't agree with each other, we strive to treat

one another with respect and to enter into conversation to gain a deeper understanding. The words Paul wrote to the church in Philippi are words he continues to write to us today:

complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. ³ Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.⁵

When you find yourself feeling empty—whether while raising children, going to work, or worshiping in this place—know that God's Spirit and this community of faith can fill your life and give you hope, for together we are one family through Jesus Christ.

¹ Hodgins, Michael; Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3914-3919). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. #608

² 2:1-4, *The Message*.

³ 2:9-11 *The Message*.

⁴ Joan C. Webb, *Meditations for Christians Who Try to Be Perfect*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 83, as quoted on *Homiletics* online.

⁵ Philippians 2:2-4, CEB.