

A Necessary Emptiness
Proper 16C, Luke 13.10-17
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On the windowsill next to my desk, there's a photograph of a Welsh priest and poet named R.S. Thomas. He seems to be scowling at me as he ambles down the path in front of the drafty stone cottage he and his poor wife lived in for years. At some point the picture frame got knocked over and the glass cracked, but it seemed to improve the overall effect, so I never replaced it.

Well, with an introduction like that I know you're really hoping for a little R.S. Thomas in this sermon. And you're in luck. It's a short poem titled "The Empty Church." And while Thomas does sound like the kind of priest who could empty out a church in a hurry, the poem is actually about the virtue, maybe even the magic, of an empty church. Here it is.

They laid this stone trap
for him, enticing him with candles,
as though he would come like some huge moth
out of the darkness to beat there.
Ah, he had burned himself
before in the human flame
and escaped, leaving the reason
torn. He will not come any more

to our lure. Why, then, do I kneel still
striking my prayers on a stone
heart? Is it in hope one
of them will ignite yet and throw
on its illumined walls the shadow
of someone greater than I can understand?

This is not a poem you're likely to find on a sappy religious greeting card with butterflies and sunbeams on the front. But if you're an acolyte, doesn't it make lighting the altar candles a little more exciting to imagine God as a giant moth who might be attracted to their flames?

Something we don't talk about much in church is emptiness--at least we don't talk about emptiness as a good and necessary part of the Christian life. And we don't often talk about those moments when our prayers feel like steel struck helplessly on our stone hearts, in hopes that a spark from one of them will cast a brief shadow of God on the wall. But haven't most of us have felt this emptiness at some time? Maybe lots of the time. I think the reason the poetry of R.S. Thomas moves me is because it names and even embraces the emptiness and absence that are part of the human experience, and the Christian experience in particular. In fact, I want to suggest that emptiness and absence are essential to the Christian life, because emptiness may be necessary to fruitfulness.

None of this seems to have much to do with our gospel lesson. But it may. It may have a lot to do with it. Jesus heals a woman who'd been bent over by an evil spirit for eighteen years.

Performing a miraculous cure sounds like a good way to fill a church, not to empty one. But let's look a little more closely.

First let's look at what else happens in Luke chapter 13. The parable of the fig tree is told right before today's story. That's the one in which what seems to be a useless, unproductive tree is given another year to flourish. The owner wants to cut it down, but his gardener asks if he can dig around it's base, apply manure, and try yet again to make it fruitful.

Right after today's story come the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the yeast, and the charge to enter by the narrow door. In mustard seeds and yeast we're reminded of almost invisible things that grow in mind blowing ways. They're almost too small to see, so it's as if emptiness and absence blow up into trees and loaves. The kingdom of God is like that, Jesus says. Then he says to forget the big, wide, obvious door. It's the narrow one, the small, almost imperceptible one you should look for. God always seems to be reversing our expectations. God has a preference for what is small, weak, last, lost, empty, nothing.

Now back to the healing of the woman whose body an evil spirit had folded in half. Robert Capon says there's more to this violation of the Sabbath than cheeky religious rule breaking by Jesus. By chapter 13 the story has begun to turn toward Jerusalem and Jesus's death. And remember that the people writing these stories down knew where all this was headed. And do you remember what happened on the Sabbath day of Holy Week? I'll remind you. Nothing. Nothing happened. Jesus was dead.

Holy Saturday is the emptiest day of the church year. There is less than even a mustard seed or a grain of yeast of Jesus in the world that day. Life was completely absent from his body. That's what Saturday had come to mean to the first Christians.

So this woman has been bent over, she's been half a body closer to the grave for 18 years. She's been broken down by an evil spirit, and get this. She doesn't even ask to be healed. But Jesus raises her up. She stands up straight. Her body lifts up from the earth and she praises God. She is lifted up on the Sabbath. It's the day when God rested after creation. A day in which work should stop for Jews. A day on which work was to stop, so as to make us mindful of our limitation and dependence. And it is also Holy Saturday, the day of emptiness and absence in the Christian story of redemption. That's when this miraculous transformation takes place.

Embedded in the Sabbath is an emptiness, a stoppage, a non activity. And the religious leaders protested because they'd forgotten what the Sabbath was for. It's a day empty of productivity so that we remember that we live by the grace and gift of God, not by what we've done ourselves. Add the foreshadowing of Jesus's dead body in the tomb on Holy Saturday, and the story's power is intensified, layers and new dimensions of meaning are added. Because you see, absence and emptiness are also the absolutely necessary preconditions for resurrection. It's not the living that are raised, you know.

The problem with the religious rulers in the story is the same as it ever was. Yes, we're always setting up rules and regulations and forgetting their purpose. But the deeper problem, and the deeper obstruction we can become arises from our fear of what we cannot control or create. It arises from a fear of absence and the disbelief that God would dare bring new life into being without our help or our approval. So we're quick to fill silence with chatter, spare time with busyness, absence with the presence of anything, anything at all as a distraction. We'll do anything to keep the emptiness at bay. But it hasn't always been so, at least not everywhere in the church.

The word "beggar" comes from the Beghards who were mendicant friars in the 13th century. They went from town to town begging for their livelihood, as did the Franciscans. We who fear emptiness and absence think immediately that this is unproductive nonsense. But Lewis

Hyde says that “the wandering mendicant takes what is empty from door to door. There is no profit; he merely stays alive if the gift moves toward him. He makes its spirit visible to us. His well-being is a sign of our well-being, as his starvation would be a sign of its withdrawal.” The mendicant was the “bearer of the empty place” for the community. That’s a strange and striking image. But we simply can’t be Christian if we think we’re in control of the gift.

A woman whose body had been folded over by an evil spirit comes to the synagogue one day to say her futile prayers, just as she’s done for eighteen long years. She is invisible, useless, empty, bearer of the empty place, perhaps. She’s come on the Sabbath, the sixth day of the week, a day of uselessness and emptiness and unproductiveness, a day that would become Holy Saturday, the day when God lay dead. And it’s on that day that Jesus raises this woman up. She is the dead fig tree that suddenly bears fruit, the mustard seed that becomes a tree, the yeast that expands into a loaf of good bread. She is the tiny, ignorable, invisible doorway to grace.

And she is why you are welcome here even and especially if you are empty, used up, bearing what seems like an absence of God in yourself. Because no matter how full and flourishing and rich our lives may seem on the surface, deep down we are all of us beggars bearing empty bowls in this life. But this is where the good news begins. Because grace is a gift. And a gift can only be received. A gift cannot earned or extracted. A gift needs an empty, open, receptive place in which to gather.

Maybe that’s why an empty church, or a church whose pews are filled and spilling over with beggars like us, can still be a place where what’s crippled is lifted up, where what’s invisible and absent becomes fruitful and full, where what’s dead is resurrected at last into new life. Amen.