

Giving God Everything
Philippians 2:1-13, Pentecost 15, Year A
25 September 2011
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

A well-worn one-dollar bill and a similarly tattered hundred-dollar bill arrived at a Federal Reserve Bank to be retired. As they moved along the conveyor belt, they struck up a conversation. The hundred-dollar bill reminisced about his travels all over the country.

“I’ve had a pretty good life,” the hundred said. “I’ve been to Vegas, the finest restaurants in New York City, and even a trip to the Bahamas.”

“Wow!” said the one-dollar bill. “You’ve really had an exciting life.”

The hundred inquired, “But tell me, one-dollar bill, where have you been throughout your lifetime?”

The one-dollar bill replied, “Oh, it’s been interesting. I’ve been to the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, and the Episcopal Church. I’ve seen the alms basin at all three.”

The hundred-dollar bill interrupted, “Wait, what’s a church?”

Yes, friends. It’s kick-off Sunday for our 2012 Stewardship Campaign. Now you can rest a bit easier. The obligatory corny stewardship joke has come and gone.

As you read in the last issue of *The Record*, we recently observed an important memorial service in our parish garden. Faculty and students from the Virginia Tech-Carilion School of Medicine joined us, and we laid to rest the cremated remains of three people who had donated their bodies to medical education. It was a lovely service, planned by the medical school students with minimal guidance from me. Doctors-in-training treated the ashes of the three cadavers with reverence. Students and faculty of varied faiths prayed, side-by-side.

The identities of these three cremated donors were unknown to those of us gathered that day in the garden and are unknown still. The only thing we know about them is that, at the end of their mortal lives, they determined to give the whole of themselves so that young doctors could train. Who knows, in a few years you find yourself being stitched up in the Emergency Room, the attending physician’s skill with needle and thread first having been formed by the sacrifice of a man or woman interred in our garden.

But that’s all we know. We aren’t aware of their family backgrounds, their professions, their religious faith, or their loves and passions. That has troubled me, and it has preoccupied me these past few days. I want to know those three people. I want to know how they made the decision to give of themselves so radically.

In today's reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians, we hear what some scholars believe to be the oldest passage in the entire New Testament. St. Paul has likely heard it elsewhere—he may even have written it himself—and in his conversation with the Philippians he determines to quote it. It is a hymn about Jesus, and it goes like this:

Christ Jesus, 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.

It has been said that the most awesome, most incomprehensible truths are best conveyed through music, and this hymn—which was likely originally set to some chant—certainly fits that bill. In just a few lines, it captures the very core of Christian belief, that which makes Christianity stunningly different from all other religious faiths. That core is this:

God—the God, the one who crafts the galaxies, and creates quantum physics, and gives the dogwood bloom, and fills a baby's lung with that first breath—that God *emptied himself* in the person of Jesus, living among us as one who experienced the basest, the worst that humanity can do to humanity. *After* creating a universe in which human life is possible; *after* giving breath to that very life; in Jesus, God chose to give of himself completely to us, without reserve.

How we make sense of this is what keeps theologians from joining the ranks of the unemployed. But the *fact* of this truth has given, and still gives the deepest comfort to people of faith. Every day, its realization changes people. As the hymn in Philippians continues, “Therefore...at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Not because of God's majesty, and not because of God's power, but *because God emptied himself of these things for us*, because God preferred *to know us as we are* rather than sit remotely on a throne in highest heaven, we know he is God and not some pretender. We praise him as Lord, as the one who has claim to our hearts and our lives.

That is the “therefore” of St. Paul's hymn. In fact, he prefaces the hymn today with the exhortation, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

In other words, Paul is challenging the Christians in Philippi. He's saying, “This is who God is. You want to know how much God's heart yearns for you? You want to know how desperately God loves you? You want to know what God gives you? The answer is *everything*.”

And how do we respond to that? How do we return that grace, that love? By letting our hearts and minds be like Jesus. By emptying ourselves. By giving God the all of us. By giving God *everything*.”

I'll never know the identities of those three people interred in our garden. But I think I know something about them. I suspect that their final act was a sacrament, a representative symbol, of the way they lived their lives. In the end, they gave away *everything*: the eyes that had gazed upon their children, the hearts that had loved, the arms that had embraced. Whether or not they claimed the Christian faith, I suspect they'd have understood Paul's hymn to the Philippians. Paul adds today, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Indeed. At the last, the three people in our garden gave everything. I'd wager they did the same at the first. I suspect they lived as they died, giving the *first* fruits of who they were for the interest of others, in recognition of the profound grace in their lives.

We here *do* claim the Christian faith, explicitly, every week. Today, St. Paul sings to us the truth at the center of that faith. In Christ, God has given everything to us. We are to give *everything* back. But how do we begin? In a culture that rebels against this very notion, that immediately seeks to rationalize it away, that instills the mantra “me first” from every quarter, what first step can we take?

This is, in the end, what stewardship is all about. Most of all, stewardship is that sacramental way—that representative symbol—by which we begin to allow our hearts and minds to be formed like those of Christ. This year's campaign theme is “first fruits,” and the hope and promise is that when we give to God the *first* portion of our material blessing, we begin to understand what it is like for God to give himself—to empty himself—for us.

I pledge to do this, and I pray you will, too. In the interest of all those served by God's church, I will give back to God in 2012 the *first* 10% of my gross income. Before I consider anything else for next year—vacations, home improvements, anything at all—I will give to God the first fruits. My prayer is that this emptying will, slowly but surely, help me to realize the Lord of my life: the one who created the galaxies, who gives the dogwood bloom, who puts breath in my children's lungs, and who beyond all of that gave *everything* to me in Jesus. It is my prayer for all of us, and I pray you'll join me.

Amen.