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 Proper 21 A: Philippians 2:1-13
 St. Anne's Church, Annapolis, MD
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In today's Epistle reading, from the letter of Paul to the Philippians, Paul invites us to a joy-filled life lived following the example of Jesus. Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in 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." Literally, Paul says, Jesus did not regard his equality with God as something to be "seized," "grasped," clung to, clenched, clasped. Although Jesus Christ could have just held fast, majestically, to the glory that was rightfully his, he "emptied himself," he let it go so he could accomplish something truly great, truly worthwhile, truly meaningful—a life lived for others, a servant's life of obedience to God.

This, says Paul, is the path to joy, the path of obedience, the path to freedom and fullness of life that we are all to live, following the example of Jesus, having the mind of Christ. Not grasping for power, not clasping to *things* for fullness, not living for more, more, more; but emptying out, serving, letting go. In the words of a prayer I read recently, not saying, "What's in it for me? But what's in me for it?"

Having the mind of Christ means not grasping for power, but living in humility. What does Paul mean by humility? The word comes from "humus," soil, the earth. Being earthy—humble—doesn't mean being weak or self-deprecating. It doesn't mean putting yourself down. It means being real, being grounded in the truth of who we are. And here is the truth: You and I are beloved of God, blessed by God with particular gifts and needs. You and I are precious in the sight of God, the work of God's own creation, made in God's own image. You and I need the grace and forgiveness and guidance of God every day. You and I are chosen and loved by God. No more, no less. And one more humble truth is that we are made into one body, one connected communion, where what I do affects you and what you do affects me. Humility is about being grounded in the truth of who we are and Whose we are. And then acting from there.

Paul writes, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." He means, when you're figuring out what to do, don't start from whether or not

something serves your own interests, but rather, does it serve others? Is the community served through your behavior? By the way, you don't serve the community if you do things that are actually unhealthy, unwholesome to yourself, like allowing abuse to continue. And there is no such thing as hurting only yourself. We're connected. Loving your neighbor as yourself means respecting the dignity of all God's people, yourself included. But ask, When you count the costs, when you figure the risks and reckon results, who is served? Do we look only after ourselves, or me and mine, or do we look outward, beyond our own needs, and serve others? Do we ask, What's in it for me? Or, what's in me for it?

An odd thing happens when we follow Christ's example of service. When we see Christ, we see a man who humbled himself, and was therefore exalted. When we see Christ we see that downward mobility, being emptied out for others, led to upward exaltation. When we see Christ, we see the Gospel at work, turning things upside down. Christ is the living example of the truth behind his teaching, a truth that was constantly surprising his disciples.

It's the truth Jesus pointed to on that day in the temple, when people were making their offerings, and the well-off people were dropping huge, ringing, clanking, attention-grabbing donations into the offering chests, and Jesus said, "Watch that widow over there instead. The one whose last two coins make scarcely a sound as they hit the bottom of the collection plate. She's the one to watch because she has emptied herself out, giving all she had to live on, rather than grasping on to her last two coins."

It's the truth Jesus pointed to on that day in Simon the Pharisee's house when a woman of questionable background not only touched Jesus, but poured out an entire jar of expensive ointment on his feet. "What a waste!" they said, "that emptying out." Jesus called it precious and appropriate and memorable.

It's the truth Jesus pointed to when people were bringing their children to him and asking him to bless them, and the disciples said, "Get those noisy, sticky children out of here! Children are not large donors! Children are useless on committees!" and Jesus said, "it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs. And if you don't know how to be small and dependent and eager like these children, you'll never know the kingdom either."

It's the truth Jesus lived and died when his life was poured out for us on the cross. Some called it a waste, that emptying out. God called it the way to exaltation. For us, it means salvation. It means that things that look like the end, are really the way to a new beginning. It means we are invited to move downward with Christ, to be emptied out in service to others, and know the joy of the Gospel for ourselves.

Being rewarded with joy is not the point. But truly, the reward comes.

What can we empty out? What can we let go of as we follow Christ? What can we loosen our grasp of and leave our hands open to receive? James Miller writes, "You

can let go of experiences that have limited you, and be open. You can let go of hurts that have bound you, and be forgiving. You can let go of your natural inclination to make life go ‘your way’ and allow life to go the way you are led. . . You can accept all that you have for what it is: a gift – a gift from that benevolent Source that is behind all that is and all that ever shall be. Nothing belongs, it is only [on loan]. That includes you and your life too.”

When we dedicate what has been entrusted to us by God for the use of God and in the service of others, we discover the mystery that nothing is lost and everything is gained. In giving, we receive. In serving others, we are served. In comforting others, we are comforted. In dying to self, we live.

The Hasidic masters tell the story of a rabbi who disappeared every Sabbath Eve, “to commune with God in the forest” his congregation thought. So one Sabbath night they got one of their cantors to follow the rabbi and observe the holy encounter. Deeper and deeper into the woods the rabbi went until he came to the small cottage of an old Gentile woman who was extremely ill and crippled into a painful posture. The rabbi entered her home and he cooked for her, carried her firewood, and swept her floor. Then, when the chores were done, he returned to his home next to the synagogue.

Back in the village, the people asked the one sent to follow him, “Did our rabbi go up to heaven, as we thought?”

“Oh no,” the cantor answered after a thoughtful pause. “Our rabbi went much, much higher than that.”

Through humble service to others, we discover the truth. As James Miller again writes,

“In being a blessing for another, you are blessed.

In being a vehicle for growth, you grow.

In being a conduit for healing, you are healed.

And, in holding out the promise that no matter what has happened, transformation is still possible, then you yourself can be transformed.

You will realize, if you do not already, that you are cared for on the grandest scale possible. And the most fitting response you can make is a prayer that contains only four words: Thank you. Thank you.”

Amen.

