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December 20, 2009

Cultivating Emptiness
Luke 1:53

There are moments in all of our lives which confront us with our human condition of emptiness. I was reminded of this truth a few days ago when I read on the front page of the *State Journal-Register* that the 116 burglaries recorded in Springfield in November were substantially more numerous than the same month in 2008. My home was one of those that were broken into during November. We spent one night in St. Louis and failed to set our alarm. That night someone pried open a door and stole jewelry belonging to Barbara and a watch and cufflinks belonging to me. It was not a very good haul for the burglars. What we owned did not have very much monetary value. But it did have a lot of sentimental value. There were items which had been gifts or purchased on trips. There were pieces passed down to us from our parents. Among the least valuable of the items taken were two pair of cufflinks with the letter L engraved on them. These were worn by my father prior to his death in 1954. I have often worn them on Sundays during my years here. Now my French cuff shirts remain hanging in my closet because the cufflinks I lost cannot be replaced. When I dress on Sunday mornings I see these shirts and I am reminded of the emptiness that is part of our human condition.

We are all very much aware of another kind of emptiness today because your associate pastor, Mark Merrill, has just begun another medical leave. We all grieve over the fact that Mark is not able at this time to carry out the ministry by which he has blessed us over the past seven and a half years. His inability to be engaged in this work produces an empty place for him and for us. Mark's openness about his struggle with anxiety and depression is healthy for him and it is helpful for those who want to be supportive of him. But the fact remains that our hearts ache for what he is going through.

The first chapter of the gospel of Luke is written for people like us. There we read about human beings who are struggling with the emptiness of their existence. Elizabeth and Zechariah are an elderly couple who have no children. As a result they are stigmatized by the society in which they live. Then there is Elizabeth's younger cousin, Mary, who is confronted with a different kind of emptiness related to children. Her well being is threatened by the social rejection that comes with having a child out of wedlock. The Christmas story depends on the willingness of these marginalized people to use their emptiness to serve the purposes of God.

Mary and Elizabeth become the vessels by which God's work enters the world. Elizabeth is the mother of John and Mary the mother of Jesus. Neither John nor Jesus could be used by God to change the world without parents to do the patient work of protecting them and guiding them through infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Zechariah make room in their lives to carry and nourish what God is bringing into the world. They cultivate their emptiness and offer it to God.

When Mary comes to understand that God has a way to use her emptiness and that of her older cousin she offers a song of praise. It is a song that shows her perception that the present conditions of her life have been redefined. She discovers that God comes to the poor and lonely. God blesses those who are most empty.

My soul magnifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God...
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant...
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty
(Luke 1:46-48,53).

God comes to those who are empty. God speaks through those who are empty. God's work in the world depends on the faith of those who cultivate their emptiness.

One of my favorite Christmas movies is a 1940 film called *Remember the Night* starring Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray, and Beulah Bondi. Barbara Stanwyck plays a young woman who is out of work and is evicted from her apartment. Then she gets caught shoplifting. Her trial takes place the day before Christmas and the prosecutor is a young assistant district attorney played by Fred MacMurray. Recognizing that the jury is not going to convict a beautiful young woman on Christmas Eve he successfully maneuvers for a delay. Then when he realizes that because of him the young woman will be spending Christmas in jail, he feels guilty. He arranges for her to be released on bail. But from that point on nothing works the way that it is supposed to. The young man quickly loses control of the situation. The romantic sparks begin to fly. Because the young woman has nowhere else to go, she ends up spending Christmas with his family on their farm.

Barbara Stanwyck's arrival is a great surprise to the young lawyer's mother and maiden aunt who live together on the farm. They both welcome her but in different ways. The mother learns that the young woman is in trouble with the law and assumes that her son is only trying to help her out of the kindness of his heart. She welcomes the young woman as a charity case and maintains a careful emotional distance. Her sister doesn't know about the young woman's past and she sees the relationship of these young people in a very different way. She does everything she can to fan the flames of the romance. She throws herself with abandon into teaching the young woman all the tricks of dressing and cooking to win the heart of the young man. In the process she opens her heart to the Barbara Stanwyck character and they become the best of friends.

The pivotal moment comes when the two sisters clash over the meaning of what is happening under their roof. The mother is so full of her pride over her son's educational accomplishments and his glowing future that she cannot see beyond Barbara Stanwyck's troubled past. She believes that a relationship with a woman like this can only do him harm. But her childless sister has the perspective of one who is empty. She says to her sister, "Anyone with eyes can see they're crazy about each other." She sees two young people who are both being changed for the better by their love for one another. She offers herself as a vessel for bringing their love to fulfillment. She has learned how to cultivate her emptiness and this Christmas has brought her a gift that goes beyond anything she could have expected.

This perspective on Christmas was expressed by Bishop Oscar Romero before he was assassinated for his efforts on behalf of the poor of Latin America. He wrote:

No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God—for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God. Emmanuel. God-with-us (quoted by Christopher A. Henry, *Journal For Preachers*, Advent 2009, page 29).

Christmas belongs to those who are empty.