

Instead, Jesus *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* (vv. 7-8). This is where we run into *kenosis* in the original Greek, where its meaning is "emptied out." Christ Jesus "emptied himself," taking the form of a slave so that he looked for all the world like a common, ordinary, nondescript, lower class, perhaps even marginalized human being!

The text tells us that God *highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (vv. 9-11).

Palm Sunday would be easy to understand if it contained only the familiar: kings, colts, crowds and cloaks. In this version of the story, King Jesus would ride into town and confront King Herod, and the one with the biggest crowd would win. But *kenosis* turns our expectations upside down. Precisely because Jesus emptied, humbled, lowered and abased himself, God exalted him and made him the king of all creation. The accomplishment of *kenosis* is fullness, glory and power: the opposite of the emptiness, embarrassment and powerlessness we would expect.

For Jesus, *kenosis* leads to glory and power because it's based on humility and obedience. Once again we turn to Peterson's interpretation: Jesus "didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of [divine] status no matter what." He was in the form of God, but chose to accept the form of a slave. That's humility.

It's a counterintuitive attitude. Keith Krell writes:

"In Lewis Carroll's famous book, *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice steps through the mirror in the living room to find a world on the opposite side where everything is backwards: Alice wants to go forward, but every time she moves, she ends up back where she started. She tries to go left and ends up right. Up is down and fast is slow.

"Similarly, Christianity is a kind of looking glass world where everything works on principles opposite to those of the world around us. To be blessed, be a blessing to others. To receive love, give love. To be honored, first be humble. To truly live, die to yourself. To gain the unseen, let go of the seen. To receive, first give. To save your life, lose it. To lead, be a servant. To be first, be last.

In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul will explain that the way up is down. That's right: Down is up, up is down. The way to be great is to go lower. The way up is down. The logical flow of Philippians has been building up to this great truth."

Want some examples? We could point to Captain "Sully" Sullenberger who landed Flight 1549 in the Hudson River, saving more than 150 passengers in the process. In the aftermath of that experience, Captain Sully exemplified humility as few could. "In an interview after the crash, he was modest about his acts of courage, attributing his poise to his training over the years: "One way of looking at this might be that for 42 years," he said, "I've been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience, education and training. And on January 15 the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal."

Or, you might point to heroes of the past, such as astronaut Neil Armstrong, a political leader like Nelson Mandela, a civil rights leader like Gandhi, or a humanitarian figure like Mother Teresa. Glory and recognition came to all of these people, although none of them sought it, nor did they think it important. Glory came to them in a counterintuitive way; as they humbly went about their business, the world took notice.

The self-emptying of Jesus was based on both humility and obedience. Paul tells us that *he was in the form of God, [but] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited* (v. 6). Instead of remaining in the safety and security of his divine existence, Jesus entered human life as a baby, a child, and eventually a man. Jesus said "Yes" to emptying himself and entering human life, and he did this out of obedience to God. Paul tells us that *he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross* (v. 8). Because of this choice, God exalted Jesus and gave him the name that is above every name, making him Lord of heaven and earth. For Jesus, *kenosis* led to kingship: because he emptied himself by being humble and obedient, God filled him with glory and power.

Which leads us to ask: how can we empty ourselves so that God will fill us? Most of us are not going to be asked to follow Jesus to the point of death on a cross. But we are certainly challenged to show humility and obedience as we walk the path of Christ in the world.

We might try to develop a welcoming attitude toward others. Martin Hengel, a great New Testament historian, taught at the University of Tübingen in Germany. In that country, professors are highly esteemed and put on a pedestal. But Pastor John Dickson remembers how Professor Hengel would invite his students to his home on Friday

evenings for meals and discussions. "He wasn't influential just because he was a brilliant scholar," says Dickson. "It was the fact that he let people come very close, that he shared his life with them - that humility is what made his influence lasting." We can show the same kind of humility, whether we are influencing students, coaching a team or leading a group of volunteers. People are grateful when we take them seriously and welcome them into our lives.

We might try to be the servant of others. Our practice of *kenosis* also includes obedience to Jesus Christ, who said to his followers: *Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant* (Matt. 20:26). Jesus asks us to empty ourselves, as he did, to serve each other, just as he *came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many* (v. 28).

We might try to be generous with material things. We might try thinking the best of others, forgiving them when they don't know what they're doing. We might try praying for our "enemies," and those who "persecute" us. We might try being a peacemaker. We might step out of our pre-conceived ideas of right and wrong, and see things from another's perspective. We might try denying ourselves and carrying a cross for a while.

These are ways we experience a self-emptying, an emptying of *self*. The good news is that this emptying does not lead to embarrassment and powerlessness. Instead, it leads to great fullness. Jesus says that *all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted*" (Matt. 23:12).

Palm Sunday has always been a predictable story of kings, colts, crowds and cloaks; but the addition of *kenosis* turns our expectations upside down. This self-emptying of Jesus, grounded in humility and obedience, is the unexpected key to his heavenly fullness, and to our fullness as well.

Sources:

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Kings, Colts, Crowds, Cloaks and Kenosis

Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Philippians 2:5-11

Palm Sunday. Clearly, this is one of the most joyful days of the Christian year. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem as a *king*. He's riding on a *colt*. And *crowds* are laying their *cloaks* on the ground before him as he rides. They cry, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matthew 21:9). The people are tired of corrupt King Herod. They want Jesus to be their ruler.

We know this story well, and it's easy for us to grasp the meaning of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt while crowds praise him and roll out the red carpet by spreading their cloaks on the road. The crowds go wild, and so do we. We wave our palm branches. We want Jesus to be our king and to rule our world with love and justice. Everyone is shouting, jumping and jostling to get a better view. The king, the son of David, is coming!

But the Palm Sunday story is not just about a king and a colt, or a crowd and their cloaks. It's also about *kenosis*. It's a Greek word, a word that's untranslatable. It comes to us in Paul's letter to the Philippians, and it's much harder to understand than the meaning of the words king, colt, crowd and cloak.

Kenosis literally means "emptiness"; but there is a deeper significance in that *kenosis* communicates the self-emptying that Christ voluntarily offered on the cross. *Kenosis* raises some important questions for us as we enter Holy Week. What did Jesus accomplish with this *kenosis*? How did his self-emptying result in our fullness? And how can we empty ourselves so that God will fill us? Holy Week forces us to confront *kenosis*, a word that is difficult, captivating and full of significance for anyone who is trying to follow Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us that Jesus existed in the form of God, but that he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited (vv. 5-6). In the words of Eugene Peterson, Jesus "didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what" (*The Message*).