

THE POVERTY OF GOD
Philippians 2:1-11
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, December 4, 2011

This morning's sermon's theme is The Poverty of God. I'm convinced that once we begin to understand all the implications of his poverty, walls will tumble down and God will become more accessible to you and me and everyone else who desires to celebrate Christmas to the fullest.

So, what do I mean by The Poverty of God? When you think of poverty you picture helpless people victimized by circumstances, society, or their own dysfunction. But what sets the poverty of God apart from human poverty is this: God intentionally chose to be born in poverty for a purpose. God, who has everything, intentionally gave it all away. Do you recall Kierkegaard's parable about the powerful young king who fell in love with a peasant girl? He realized if he tried to marry her as a king, he'd never really know if she married him out of fear or for love. So what did he do? He took a risk. He gave up everything, became a peasant in order to make love possible. Of course this is a parable meant to drive home the point that God took a risk and gave up everything in order to make love with us possible. God sacrificed himself and became poor. God surrendered his power and became powerless.

Paul's letter to the Philippians makes this clear. On a personal note, today's scripture has helped me understand the implications of the Christmas story. Paul wrote that Jesus **"who though was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking on the form of a slave. And being in human form became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross."**

We ask the question, "Why did God create the world?" The only answer can be because God is love. When God spoke and created the world and us and gave us the world to live in he did it all for love.

Parents can identify with this. Why did you have children? For love. At the same time, when God looked down and saw how we abused the gift of free will and became estranged from him and each other, causing ourselves a lot of pain and heartache, it was that same unconditional love that led God to become one of us, to be born into the poverty of our humanity. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him has eternal life."**

One of the keystones of our Christian faith is the conviction that God is sovereign. That is, nothing in all creation is more powerful than God. At the same time, God is apart from creation, that is, God is no more a part of creation than is the carpenter who made this pulpit a part of the pulpit. Instead God is all powerful and yet God gave up his power. God put limits on himself. So paradoxically, God is not all powerful because God gave it all up

for love. You see, whenever anyone decides to love, the one who loves surrenders power to the other. When you make yourself vulnerable to the other, you take a great risk because there's no guarantee that you'll be loved back. If this is true in human relationships, it's especially true of God's relationships with us. And we can see this surrender of power, in all its glory, in the manger. The Christ child is living proof God emptied himself to make love possible.

Think of a pitcher being emptied of water or a battery being drained of its energy. Now think of God draining himself for you and me. And don't think God was play acting when he became a helpless baby. God was doing the real thing, giving up what was rightfully his. And then as we watch this baby grow into Jesus of Nazareth and we recall his teachings and how he practiced what he preached and then how Jesus gave up his life, then we see in no uncertain terms that God really did surrender himself. But what makes this ultimate surrender of self so gut wrenching is that while God intentionally gives himself away, you and I and the rest of humanity are continuously grabbing all we can get.

Think about that for a minute. The way of the Kingdom is self surrender, but the way of the world is self promotion. Society teaches us to climb up the ladder whereas Jesus teaches us to climb down. This doesn't mean Jesus doesn't want us to be successful in our careers, but he does want us to be successful in our living and the only way to be truly successful is to follow Jesus' example and give ourselves away to each other.

Listen again to what Paul wrote to the Philippians: **"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourself. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."**

Please don't think when Paul writes **"think of others as better than yourself"** Paul is inviting you to have an inferiority complex. Jesus doesn't want you to be a victim anymore than he saw himself as being a victim. Remember, when they crucified Jesus they didn't take his life, instead Jesus willingly laid down his life for his friends and his enemies.

Even as Jesus made a gift of himself for you and me, we are invited to make a gift of ourselves to Christ and each other. And when you give by giving away the very substance of who you are...that's powerful.

One of the great traditions the Church has incorporated into our Christmas celebrations is the crèche or the manger scene with statues of Mary and Joseph, shepherds, animals and the magi positioned around the baby Jesus. This tradition came from Italy; more specifically from Saint Francis of Assisi. On Christmas Eve in 1223, St. Francis asked that a crude stable with live animals and a newborn baby and his parents be set up in the town square so the odors of straw and dung, the sounds of cattle and sheep, and the cries of a newborn could all converge to underscore the intrinsic poverty of the one who came into the world. From that Christmas Eve in 1223 came the custom of having a manger scene in each home as a visual reminder of the great love given to the world, the best he has to offer, God's own self.

During the Advent Season as you catch yourself becoming preoccupied with what gifts to buy for family and friends, don't let these store bought gifts become a poor substitute for the very best gift you can give. Make yourself available and vulnerable so your relationship with God can become more genuine and intimate. Spend time with God. Let God love you and then let his love spill over from your life and into the lives of those God places around you. Let God help you become poor so when you hear Jesus say, "**Blessed are the poor,**" you'll appreciate the full implication of his blessing.

Advent is not something to rush through, instead it's a season meant to be savored. God gives us this time to spend with him and each other so we, like Jesus, can turn around and serve our neighbors with love and kindness with no thought of reward.

The poverty of God is the power of God draining into our lives so we can be filled with the desire to drain ourselves in order to make love possible. May God bless us with his poverty so we will be rich for Christ's sake.

Let us pray!