

GIFTS OF THE DARK WOOD

3) The Gift of Emptiness

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Each Sunday during this season of Lent, we are considering the Gifts of the Dark Wood, that is, the gifts that are made known to us in the places of struggle, difficulty and doubt—the places that we would not necessarily choose if it were up to us. In fact, these are often the places that life has a way of choosing for us, whether we like it or not.

Rather than try to run from these dark wood moments, rather than try to ignore them or avoid them at all costs, there is wisdom in choosing to face them, live into them and learn from them. For it is often the experience of the dark wood that opens the door to the insight, self-understanding and spiritual awareness that enables us to live with greater wisdom and depth.

Last week, we considered the “dark wood” experiences of uncertainty and the insight that, as much as it may make us uncomfortable, our uncertainty can play a very creative and essential role in the development of our faith. As Anne Lamott would remind us, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.”

This morning, we consider yet another gift of the dark wood that may not initially strike us as a gift that we would want. I am referring to the gift of emptiness. Now, admittedly, that sounds a bit odd, doesn't it?

Emptiness is not a gift that we, as human beings, tend to value—especially as human beings living in a culture that especially values being filled with the things, the rewards, the titles, the honors and the recognition that are considered the primary indicators of the good life. The very idea of not valuing these things and pursuing them with passion and purpose is considered, by some, to be virtually un-American. Our culture has long preached the gospel of acquisition and consumption, the gospel that suggests that we are what we own, what we consume, and how we perform.

It was **John D. Rockefeller**, one of the richest people who ever lived, who was once asked how much wealth it would take before he was truly satisfied. His response was most revealing: “Just a little bit more,” he said.

Even though we may not identify it as such, I believe that it is this mantra of “just a little bit more” that is, so often, at work within us, causing us to lose our balance as we seek to determine the qualities and values of the life that is truly worth living. Like the rich and foolish farmer in the parable of Jesus, we tell ourselves that when we have a little bit more, then we will be able to relax, let go, and enjoy ourselves and live the life we've always wanted. The problem is that, for many people, this is little more than a fantasy that they entertain. Whether they will admit it or not, the truth is that the idea of “a little bit more” has become so imprinted within their thinking that they find it difficult if not impossible to let go of it.

As a result, they become so focused on gaining “just a little bit more” in wealth, power and prominence, that they lose their ability to see themselves as they really are underneath all their striving and posturing.

They prefer, instead, to see themselves as others see them, or, as they would like others to see them. So it is that they pour all of their energy and effort into “keeping up appearances” and creating the perception that they have it all together. It is this ego driven effort that leads to the creation of what Richard Rohr and others refer to as **“the false self.”** The false self, says Rohr, is essentially the creation of our own mind and our desire to be perceived as significant and impressive in the titles, roles and accomplishments that we have created.

Thus, our focus is trained not upon who we really are, but upon who we want others to think we are.

Given this very human tendency, Rohr suggests that the critical question that we must address is this: **“How much false self are you willing to shed to find your true self?”** In other words, how much are we willing to let go of the pretense and the posturing that our egos often require in order to face our inner emptiness? Are we willing to actually see ourselves as we really are—with all of our flaws and foibles? For some, the answer is a clear and unequivocal, “no.” They would rather retain the illusion of who they are.

Eric Elnes, the author of “Gifts of the Dark Wood,” shares the arresting insight of the late Unitarian Pastor, **Forrest Church** who begins his book, **“Lifecraft,”** with this penetrating insight... **“Let me begin by telling you a little about yourself,” he writes. “To one extent or the other, the following is true:”**

You are self-conscious about your appearance.

You feel guilty about things you have done or failed to do.

You sometimes have a hard time of accepting yourself or forgiving others.

You are insecure sexually.

You are a less than perfect parent, or a less than perfect child of imperfect parents—or both.

You are a frustrated husband, wife, or partner or you are frustrated not to be a husband, wife or partner.

You have secrets, which you might betray, or which might betray you, at any moment.

However successful you are, you fail in ways that matter both to you and your loved ones.

Beyond all this, your life is stressful, your happiness fleeting, your health insecure.

You worry about aging. You sometimes worry about dying.

More than once your heart has been broken by betrayal or loss.

And however successful you may be, however deep your faith, when the roof caves in, you shake your fist at heaven, the fates, or life itself.

You beg for an answer to the question, “Why”—Why this? Why me? Why now?

You wonder what life means.

Now, I don’t know how many of these statements ring true for you, but I do know that Forrest Church is speaking to a reality that, try as we might, we cannot fully deny or avoid.

This is not an inaccurate description of the human condition. We all know that in some fundamental ways, we are broken, that we are bruised and that we simply don't have it all together. And yet, we are afraid that if we admit that reality and acknowledge our failure that, somehow, we will be less worthy, less acceptable, and less valuable in the eyes of others and in the eyes of God.

And it is this fear that is our great undoing. It is this fear of being real and open and vulnerable that keeps us from ever discarding our false selves in favor of our true selves.

In the sub-culture that we live in (Alamo, Danville, Walnut Creek), this fear is not only real, but it is actually running rampant in our midst. It will not surprise you when I say that this is not an easy place in which to confront our own emptiness and struggle. It is not an easy place to be open about one's faults or to be vulnerable to admit one's weakness. We don't do vulnerability very well in a culture predicated upon image and perception.

And it is therefore, very difficult to discard our false selves in favor of discovering our true selves.

Can you imagine, for a moment, just what your life would look like if you weren't afraid to be vulnerable? Can you imagine how it would feel if you didn't have to uphold the posture of having it all together? Can you imagine how liberating that would be?!

The good news is that we don't have to be guided by this fear. We don't have to pretend that our life is perfect or that we have all the pieces to life's puzzle already in place. The good news is that we can let go of that fear by facing our emptiness, by naming our brokenness and trusting that, in God's eyes, we are already loved and accepted for who we really are.

Now, I realize that this is far easier said than done. I realize that it is much easier to talk about God's accepting love than to actually place our trust in that love. While we often give lip service to the power of this love, it can be another matter to actually live in that knowledge.

In his book, "God First Loved Us," Anthony Campbell offers this insight:

"The more I worked with it, the more I realized that the acceptance in faith of God's unconditional love was not only hugely significant, but it required a major change of attitude...the major shift (may be seen) in the images we have of God and ourselves. How radically is our image of God reshaped if we take seriously the belief in God as deeply, passionately, and unconditionally loving us? How radically must we rework our own self-image if we accept ourselves as loveable—as deeply, passionately, and unconditionally loved by God?" (Anthony Campbell / God First Loved Us / Paulist Press)

If we are able to actually do that—if we are able to truly trust that we are loved deeply, unconditionally and passionately by God, it will not only enable us to rework our self-image, it will enable us to break free of the fear that seeks to prevent us from being honest and open and vulnerable about ourselves—the fear that would prevent us from being our true selves.

In our lesson from Luke's Gospel, this morning, Jesus offers what I consider to be one of his core teachings: **"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."**

There it is—a core teaching of Jesus that invites us to experience what I would call, "a core process" of faith: the process of losing ourselves, of letting go of our ego driven needs to be impressive, of allowing ourselves to become empty in order that we might be filled by a profound trust that we are loved and accepted by God "as is," without qualification. As we travel the road of faith, this is a process that we will never outgrow.

As Christians, of course, we are reminded that, at the very center of our faith, stands a symbol that points to the central importance of emptiness—the symbol of the cross. Jesus, Paul tells us in Philippians, "emptied himself" by taking upon himself the suffering of the cross. So it is that we, who follow this Jesus, are called to "take up our own cross daily," that is, to empty ourselves of the illusion of the pretense and posturing that supports the false self.

I realize that some might suggest that this idea that emptiness as a gift is a bit esoteric and that it has little application to day to day reality, I would disagree. You see, I believe that it is through our willingness to acknowledge our emptiness, to name our brokenness and to see ourselves as we really are, that we are then able to be filled with a love that frees us to live fully, deeply, authentically and passionately. And this is, I believe, one of the greatest gifts that we might ever receive. **Amen.**