

A profound philosopher named Popeye once said, “I am what I am, and that's all that I am.” And even more profound philosopher named Descartes wrote “I think, therefore I am.” While Popeye and Descartes would probably not been the best of friends had Popeye been a living person at the time of Descartes, both of their philosophies share the same focus. Me, me, me. We pride ourselves as Americans for being independent individuals. I remember reading an article when I was in my twenties about behaviors that a person should leave behind at each stage in life as a successful, independent individual. If I remember correctly, the article stated that by the time a person hits 30 years old, they should stop asking people for rides to and from the airport, and they should definitely not ask for help when moving furniture. The argument was that by the time a person hits 30 years old, they should have a well paying job that enables them to pay for a taxi from the airport and to hire movers. As a naïve 20-something I took this advice to heart. After all, I didn't want to be a burden to my friends, or be perceived as some sort of failure. Thank God, we don't stay in our 20's forever.

Apparently, the writer of the magazine article did not include Paul's letter to the early church in Philippi in their research. In this letter Paul calls on the community to adopt the attitude of Christ: instead of putting one's own interests first, consider what is best for other people, don't do anything for selfish purposes but be humble. Paul then begins to quote a hymn that would have been familiar to the readers of the letter. The hymn describes the actions of Jesus and the nature of his existence on earth. The hymn says that Jesus emptied himself. What does that mean? The Greek word used in this phrase is “kenoō” (ken-AH-oh) which literally means “to make empty.” There are a few ways to interpret this phrase and you can find scholars and theologians to support almost any perspective of the phrase “he emptied himself.” But given the context of the beginning this letter, it seems to me that Paul's intention is to point out that Christ emptied himself of his own needs and filled himself up with the needs of humanity. Jesus is the perfect example of letting go of one's own will and self-preservation in order to obediently and humbly follow the will of God. In his letter, Paul is calling on the church to imitate this attitude of Christ in their community.

Since today is World Communion Sunday, it is fitting that the commentators from the Pulpit Fiction podcast would connect Paul's instructions to the South African philosophy of

Ubuntu.¹ A Zulu word, ubuntu in a nutshell means “I am, because we are.” My humanity only thrives within the thriving of the community. Desmond Tutu explained it this way: “One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu – the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.”²

You are connected and what you do *affects the whole world*. It is for the whole of humanity. This is the life of faith that Paul is pointing to in the life and ministry of Jesus. Because when our humanity is connected to the thriving of all humanity, there is no longer a separation of my needs from your needs from the needs of our neighbor or from the needs of people in Puerto Rico. When one part of humanity is hurting, it hurts the humanity of everyone. Instead of “I am what I am” we are called live in the world with the attitude that I can only be fully me, when you are able to be fully you. It should be noted that holding this worldview of Ubuntu does not mean ignoring or denying your own needs. Instead it is the acknowledgement that our needs can only truly be met within a greater community.”

This is the essence of kenoō (ken-AH-oh). To empty oneself of self-serving motivations. However, this is one of those practices that sounds easier said than done. How do we go about emptying ourselves? Theology Professor William Greenway gives us a clue. He writes that “One does not self-empty by focusing on oneself. One is emptied to the self to the degree one is overcome by the needs, pains, hopes, and desires of others.” In other words, we become empty of our selfish motivations and concerns because we turn our attention to the needs of others. If our main focus is to make sure that our fellow humans and the planet and its creatures are thriving, it becomes impossible to put ourselves first.

What would it look like in our individual lives, and more importantly in our communal life as a church, as a city, as a nation, to make the needs of others our priority. How would

¹ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper21a>

² <http://uwi-usa.blogspot.be/2012/01/ubuntu-brief-meaning-of-african-word.html>

our budgets and our policies change? Would we allow millions of people to go without clean water, food, or to live in unsanitary conditions? Would we allow people to live an existence in which they can either afford to refill a prescription or to put food on the table, but not both? Or would we take a good hard look at our priorities and realize that we can not realize our God-desired potential as individuals or as a community, when others are suffering. Paul writes that his joy will be made complete when the church in Philippi takes on the attitude of Christ. An attitude of kenoō (ken-AH-oh) of Ubuntu.

Then Paul continues to instruct them to “carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” I’m not sure there is a more loaded phrase in the Christian tradition than “carry out your salvation with fear and trembling.” First of all, salvation is often a dirty word in progressive Christian circles. It carries with it phrase “being saved” which is typically associated with conservative churches who profess one must be saved by believing in Jesus in order to get into heaven. The flip side is then that if you don’t believe in Jesus and get saved, then you will go to hell. But the Rev. Dr. Timothy Murphy offers a different perspective on salvation that is held by many progressive Christians. He asks who ever said the problem we are saved from had to be hell? “In the story of the Exodus, the Hebrews are saved from Egyptian slavery and saved for freedom in the Promised Land. They celebrate God as their savior who delivers them from their tormentors. There’s no hell in sight! Every reflection on salvation worth its salt has a two-fold stance: saved from something bad (like slavery) and saved for something good (like freedom).”³

What are we saved from by adopting the attitude of Christ? We are saved from isolation, we are saved from inward focus, we are saved from a superficial existence, we are saved from the sin of ignoring the needs of others and even benefitting from their oppression. And what good things are we saved for by adopting the attitude of Christ? We are saved for an interconnected life, we are saved for a life full of meaning, we are saved for a humanity in which everyone’s needs are met, we are saved for fulfilling God’s purpose for us.

Now what about that fear and trembling? According to Thayer's Greek Lexicon, this phrase is frequently used in scripture to describe the anxiety of one who distrusts his ability

³ <https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/reclaiming-salvation-for-today/>

completely to meet all requirements, but religiously does his utmost to fulfil his duty”⁴ (Repeat this.) Carrying out the salvation of a community and imitating Christ is a daunting task. I know I don’t usually have confidence that I can live into this call. Our culture strongly conditions us to look out for ourselves first and foremost. Rev. Greenway, whose words about self-emptying were really helpful earlier, offers a blunt reality check. He writes that “when kenosis hits real life, one either compromises by prioritizing survival concerns, or one gets crucified.” He explains that “today, most of us would not be killed.” Phew! “We would more likely be rendered destitute, stripped of prestige, wealth, and security, find ourselves outcast.” We may not be killed, but those are certainly some major crosses to bear.

So where’s the good news in that? The good news is that God does not expect us to be perfect and offers us abundant grace when we fall short. We are not expected to be Jesus, but we are called to imitate him. And we are not called to do this alone. In fact, going it alone ignores the message of this letter. We can find assurance and comfort in our community and in the love of God. We can encourage and support one another in our efforts to be like Christ both as individuals and as a church. We can join each other on our journeys in listening for the ways God is still speaking to us as a community of faith and as people of faith. Finally, Paul reminds the church in Philippi as well as this church in Brainerd, Minnesota, that God is at work in us. God is present in our care for one another and inspires us to listen for and act upon God’s desires for humanity.

When we do that, when we lift each other up, every single other regardless of nationality, and all the other divisions we humans have created for ourselves, when we attend to enriching the humanity of everyone, I believe God truly rejoices.

⁴ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G5156&t=NIV>