

Sermon preached by The Right Reverend Dorsey W. M. McConnell, D.D.  
Eighth Bishop of Pittsburgh  
On December 29, 2013  
At Saint Paul's Cathedral  
Text: Philippians 2:1-11

Thanks to a little research I was able to do among you just before the service, I have learned that many if not most of us have come a long way to get here. My wife and I, for example, have traveled across five time zones, and some of you, I know, have come further. Some long journeys take no deliberation at all. For example if someone you loved were in danger, if your spouse, your fiance, your sister or brother, or one of your children were sick or lost or in prison, even half a world away, you'd drop everything, you'd even borrow the money, and you'd go. Surely any of us would.

But what if the person you loved, who was in such danger, did not love you? What if they had betrayed you, abused your trust, insulted you daily, and harmed others you loved without a thought? What if they had robbed you of your dearest possessions which they then degraded and destroyed? What if in one moment they had acted cruelly in your name, and in the next moment denied you even existed? How far would you go to help such a person? Would you cross the globe, spend everything you had, even lay down your life, without any guarantee that their attitude toward you would change in the slightest? What kind of love would it take to make such a journey?

The passage we have just heard from Paul's letter to the Philippians describes exactly that journey. Human beings have, from the time of our inception, abused God, used him, robbed him and denied him. Paul says God's final response to all of this is to cross eternity and infinity, to inhabit this world of our hates and hopes, our dreams and our delusions, to save the humanity he loves. As Paul says, by becoming human in Jesus of Nazareth God first *empties*, then *humbles* himself, not only to death but to a shameful death, naked, broken, publicly humiliated, and finally executed on the Cross. He makes this offering joyfully, decisively, in full knowledge of what He is doing. He moves across all time, all history, all space, all geography, all matter, to take up residence in one particular life, one body of flesh and blood, with the distinct intention from the beginning to offer that life for the sake of the creation he has made and everyone in it, for each of us and all of us together, from beginning to end. All for the purpose of bringing us together with one another and with Him.

Now apart from the fact that the claim sounds preposterous on its face, and always has, there are at least two other questions that come up almost immediately. Why should my sins require such a long journey, that God should *empty* himself? And why should he in addition, *humble* himself in so radical and desperate a sacrifice?

First, the self-emptying of God. Most of us are not very artful about our sins. Take your preacher: my sins which are countless are without exception unimaginative and boring. There is not a hint of real creativity in them. My family can confirm this. They have been the same, with minor variations in execution, for most of my sixty years. But they

are potent enough to cause real harm: when I do or say something that makes one I love stop talking to me; when my friend is hurt by my neglect and cuts himself off from me; when my family is shocked by something I say; when a colleague feels I have betrayed them. You know what it feels like when you are sitting next to someone you have really hurt, or who has really hurt you, how it feels as though they are a universe away from you. You would give anything to bring them back across what feels like infinite space, but you can't because you can't even touch them or reach them, though they are right there. So if it were true that there was a God who had crossed infinite distance to get to us, might it not be possible for that same God to empty himself into the chasms between us, to fill them with his grace and his love, until that space were so full of mercy that we might walk across it toward each other in the hope of being reconciled?

If that were true, it would explain why God must empty himself. But why should he also humble himself? Why the Cross?

There are some things that we, as human beings, do to one another, that we cannot possibly make up for. Whenever I refuse to love, when I use another for my own ends, when I indulge in the kind of petty dishonesties and self-aggrandizement that make up so much of human discourse and in the end add up to one great lie, when I contribute by my own indifference and sloth to the slow murder of the poor and the oppressed, it is as though I punch a hole in the fabric of the universe. I offend the justice of God. I create a debt beyond my capacity to repay. And when I am caught in the act my first reaction is not to admit it all and apologize. The mere fact Christ has paid this debt on the Cross does not make my repentance any easier. Ask anyone in my family and they will tell you I have no talent whatsoever for apologizing. Early one morning I was annoyed by our cat, who awakened us by jumping up on the dresser and knocking things off with her paw. I threw a Bible across the room at her; she ducked, and the book brought down and enormous antique bevelled mirror worth hundreds of dollars that shattered spectacularly sending glass everywhere.

After several moments of pregnant silence, Betsy finally said, "Well?"

I said, "Well what?"

"Are you going to apologize?" she asked.

I said, "I'm so... I'm so..." That's as far as I could get. The rest of the word just stuck in my throat, as it still does on many occasions today.

But Christ in humbling himself on the Cross has established for my sake a humility I do not have. He lays it down as a bridge between myself and the one I have offended. And here, a remarkable thing happens: as I cross that bridge, the humility of Jesus begins to become my own. It is nothing short of a miracle. Left to my own devices I always hold myself back, because I am afraid of the humiliation I feel when I lay down my defences and admit my need for grace. But when I remember the Cross, and hold on to the humility of Christ, the warmth and kindness of his self-humbling becomes more attractive than the prison of my own pride. I can begin to say what I need to say, do

what I need to do, begin to allow God to lead me back to the one I ought to love across the distance he has already filled by emptying himself.

I am willing to bet that every one of us in this place is carrying the burden of an unreconciled relationship. It may be something between you and the person next to you, or between you and someone a thousand miles away, or a burden you carry for someone else whom you love and who is cut off from those around them. The most troubled relationship I have ever had was with my father. He was a great American general, a powerful and distant man. I adored him, but I could never get close to him. He could be brutal and demeaning, and I carried the wounds of that disappointment for many years. I could not perceive the multiple ways in which I was effected by the estrangement I carried, how it hampered my love, quickened my resentments, misdirected my ambition. It was only as I began to know the love of Christ, helped as I was by the mercy and love I received from others, especially from my wife, that I could begin to forgive him. I doubt he was ever aware there was a problem; that made no difference. The humility and self-emptying of Jesus filled the space between us and I was able gradually to have compassion for him, and actually to love him in a way that expected nothing in return. Years after his death I had a dream of him the way God now sees him. He was like a young man, strong, clear-hearted, freed from the agonies that had shackled him in this life. He held up his hands in blessing, and I knew it was the blessing not just of my father but of Christ himself. I have carried that blessing since every day of my life.

And that is the same blessing that surrounds us all as we leave this glorious place. I don't know if that's what you were looking for when you came, but it's going with us today whether we like it or not, this blessing Jesus who has emptied and humbled himself for our sake. What does this blessing mean for us right now? What difference can it truly make? I'd suggest we take a couple of clues from this glory we stand in right here and now at Saint Paul's. Before you go you might take a moment to look at the mosaics of the angelic figures that surround us in this nave and choir, culminating in the seated figure of Christ On the ceiling of the apse. Notice that every one of them has hands outstretched, uplifted in blessing. So pick one, and imagine in its place the person you need to forgive, or the one who needs to forgive you, Christ's own hands filling theirs, blessing you through them. Ask Him for the grace to see them this way. Ask Him to fill the distance between you-- to forgive where you cannot, heal what you cannot.

And then take in the second clue: this one is in the bronze doors you all came through today, the ones at the back that move on their own. Each has a glass panel etched with a verse from Genesis: Behold this is the house of God, the Gate of Heaven. It's referring to this cathedral of course, but it works just as well going the other direction, out into the world. Saint Paul says elsewhere that we literally can't get away from Christ. He is before all things, the apostle says, and in Him all things hold together. Because of his self-emptying and self-humbling he now fills the very air we breath, inhabits every space around us and within us, even connects our pulse to our blood. So His mercy is available at all times everywhere, for anyone who would ask. But do pay

attention to the printed sign beneath in each of the portals just beneath the glass: it reads, "Automatic door: don't push." (Actually, if you push I am told the door stops dead!)

So receive the grace and mercy of Christ and act on it, but be patient: don't push. You cannot make someone forgive you anymore than you can force yourself to forgive another when you are not yet ready. But you can take the outstretched hand of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, who now fills all in all, and you can ask him to help you see the next step and walk with him patiently. And if your faith is too weak even for that, begin with something else: in the silence of your heart, talk to Him as if he were there, ask him to show you what the chasm you most fear would look like if it were filled with his mercy and his love, if it were bridged by His grace; then ask him to give you the power to take one step toward him into that fearful space, and you will find the dark emptiness made solid under your feet; you will find yourself invited into a glory of which all this is only a hint. Whereas once your fears and hurts used you to multiply your sins, now God will ask to use you to multiply his mercies. In short, you will find the door of your true home in Christ, the person you were made to be from before the foundations of the world. It will remain for you only to say Yes and enter in. Thanks be to God for His glorious Gospel.