

The Poured Out Life
Philippians 2:5-9

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest. He died in 1996, after a good life and most surprising career. Nouwen received doctoral degrees in both theology and psychology and then taught at three universities—Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard. And then in 1985, when he was 53 years old, he quit his teaching position at Harvard to become pastor to a little community in Canada called Daybreak, one of a string of *L'Arche* houses around the world—residential homes for adults with developmental disabilities. Henri lived at Daybreak, and worked there every day, until his death ten years later.

Henri Nouwen wrote many books, both before and after his academic appointments. Today, on this first Sunday of Lent, I want to tell you about just one of them—a small book called *In the Name of Jesus*. He wrote it shortly after his transition out of teaching. In it, Nouwen re-tells the story from the Gospels about how Jesus was tempted; Nouwen reflects on his own temptations as a leader, a teacher, a human being.

You've heard the story of Jesus' temptations before. Just after Jesus was baptized, he went out into the desert and he fasted for forty days. At the end of that time, a voice came to Jesus. It wasn't a mean or threatening voice; it was a beguiling one. 'Do something great,' the voice said; 'If you're really the son of God, why wouldn't you just take all these rocks you see and turn them into bread—for yourself and for everyone else who's hungry? Think of all the good you could do.' Later the voice of temptation came again. It led him to the top of a tall mountain. It said, 'Wouldn't it be impressive if you could *prove* you're the child of God? What would happen if you jump? Aren't angels supposed to come and save you from getting hurt?' A third time that voice came to Jesus. Remember he was hungry, stripped away of the familiar structures that had given him his identity. 'Don't get boxed in,' the voice said. 'You and I can do something great together. Join my team. I'll put you in charge. We will change the world.'

Nouwen recognized each of Jesus' temptations in his own life too. He named them. In contemporary language, they are the temptations to be relevant, to be spectacular, to be powerful. They're not bad things; that's what makes them temptations. And they were, Nouwen saw, the same desires that had steered him toward accomplishment and success at three of the top universities in the world. Being relevant and spectacular and powerful were skills and assets he'd excelled at. Those motivations led him to develop connections and reputation that served him well.

Nouwen made a decision to let all those things go—his relevance to public life, the title that made him famous and credible, the platform from which he might change the lives of hundreds of students. He went to live at Daybreak—a small life, in a small place, no doubt a small salary. He gave up all the things that had reminded him of his worth, his value. He traded in the markers of his success, to live simply, daily, alongside people who didn't care one bit about how many books he'd written, or how many students wanted to take his classes, or how many speaking invitations he received every year. His only goal became to love those people completely, to immerse himself in the routines of their every mundane day, a small group of people the rest of the world had no use for, people who couldn't even read the books he'd written.

Why would a respected university professor, a published author, do that? What, other than pure saintliness, might have compelled Henri Nouwen to *choose* this unusual path of downward mobility? To waste, some might say, a sparkling, promising, impactful career? This is what Nouwen said: “Others thought I was doing really well, but inside of me, something was telling me—I knew--that my success was putting my soul in danger.”

My success was putting my own soul in danger.

We’re not all Henri Nouwen. His calling may not be my calling, or yours, just like we’re not all called to be Mother Teresa. But there’s an echo in his story of the song that the earliest Christians sang about Jesus, the song we heard from the Book of Philippians a few minutes ago.

*He was God on earth,
but he didn’t think of being equal with God something to exploit.
He emptied himself
becoming as limited, as powerless, as human beings.
And then, when he found himself in the form of a human,
he humbled himself even more.
All the way to a submissive, humiliating death. (paraphrased)*

Kenosis is the Greek word for what Jesus did. He emptied himself, poured himself out for the sake of something larger than his own life, to serve God’s love in the world. The early Christians sang this song because this was the shape of the life they knew they were being called to imitate. This was the essential Christian story. Over and over again, Jesus called his followers to do what he did. ‘Pour yourself out,’ he said.

- *Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them. (Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35)*
- *I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24)*

When I first came to Los Altos, in the first few months of my time with you, I thought I got a glimpse of what our essential work together might be about. I saw in you the same thing I see in myself: that we are people of accomplishment and success. We are safe; our lives are, mostly, secure. We don’t feel strong every moment—at least I don’t—but by and large, we have, through some combination of hard work and privilege, a high expectation of well-being for our lives. I barely know what Jesus is talking about when he talks about losing your life. We have not fallen into the ground and died, like seeds that depend on the cycle of death and new life; we have risen and risen and risen again. We do good as often as we can, but even that has not required us to fast from the good things that fill us up.

If I really pay attention when we read the Gospels of the New Testament, it seem clear: people like us are not the ones Jesus had in mind when he said:

*God has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,*

*to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* (Luke 4:18-19)

We might be on the wrong side of the equation that Mary sang about when she first learned she was pregnant:

*He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.* (Luke 1:53)

So what is my place—what is *our* place—in the good news of Jesus Christ, who came to bring to life God's dream for the earth? What does life look like for people with money and power, people of accomplishment and success, when they attach themselves to this One whose pattern was to continually move down, to pour himself out, to empty himself of the benefits of his identity? If we are not pouring ourselves out in some way for the sake of others, have we missed something critical about what it means to be a Christian? What does it mean to be people of privilege who are also followers of Jesus?

I ask these questions not to point at you or to make you feel guilty. I'm asking them for myself. My soul too is at risk. I feel some urgency about having this conversation because my time with you is short. My preaching career is coming to an end. And I wonder if these are the questions our faith has been trying to point us to all along. Whether we've been putting the wrong key into the lock of a door we want to open, and feeling cheated when the lock won't turn.

If we don't at least wrestle honestly with these questions, we might be missing something essential about this life of faith that keeps tugging at us, this story that keeps trying to steer us toward something true, something that will make our lives fuller than we know how to make them ourselves, something Christ-shaped.

I want that. Don't you?

Exactly two years ago today was our last worship service in this sanctuary before the long pandemic pause. These last two years have interrupted our Sunday patterns, our whole lives. But I wonder if what's happened to church isn't a metaphor for something much larger. We've learned that we can 'do church' from the comfort of our couches. We can 'rise in spirit' rather than stand up to sing or to receive a blessing. Many of us have retreated over these last couple of years into patterns that hemmed us in at first, but that have grown familiar, even comfortable. I suspect we have become spectators rather than participants in many parts of our lives. But I also suspect that we've been settling for a comfortable, non-demanding faith for much longer than two years.

Perhaps this Lent can be a time to examine the posture we've gotten used to. In the last two weeks as we've done baptisms in worship, my ears have caught on one of the promises parents make to their child: to 'live lives that *become* the Gospel'. That's a demanding frame for our intentions, to *become* something we are not now. What if that Gospel, the good news of Jesus, even the key to our happiness, is not about self-fulfillment, but self-emptying?

Please God, help us lift our heads. Hear you.

