

THE EMPTY SPACE

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Thirty years ago the senior pastor of a large and prominent church in New York City – The Riverside Church – stood before his congregation the Sunday following the death of his 24 year old son in a car accident and preached a sermon. William Sloane Coffin did what few preachers would attempt to do a week after their son's death – not just preach, but preach about the indescribable pain that such a death visits upon a person, and in particular, a parent. Some of you know of this pain. It is a fine sermon and worth your googling it when you get home – *Alex's Death* it is called.

I read it for the first time as a seminarian preparing myself to enter into the ministry of preaching and when I read it I realized what Dr. Coffin was attempting to do. He bravely stood before his people that day because he wanted to teach them out of what had become for him, in an instant, an empty space. A space that had once been filled with a young, vibrant, energetic, fun-loving young son had now in the blink of an eye been left empty. He wanted to teach about the empty space. Not that he called it that – but that is what it was. And part of what Dr. Coffin reflected upon was the well-meaning effort of many to try to fill his empty space. People don't like empty spaces. Neither their own nor others. There is something about empty spaces we want to fill. Many tried to fill Dr. Coffin's empty space. Some tried to fill it with pithy poems. Some tried to fill it with dime-store theology. Some tried to fill it by explaining the will of God. Some tried to fill it with Bible verses. Some tried to fill it with platitudes. But Dr. Coffin that morning before his congregation of thousands was there to say that the empty space was not theirs to fill. It wasn't even his to fill.

Almost fifty years ago a tiny little book got published in England written by a N.W. Clerk and it was a book about grief – *A Grief Observed*, it was titled. And it was the raw first-hand account of the penetrating grief of losing one’s spouse. This man had lost his wife and the ache was so deep that in the book he questions the presence of God. Where is God when it comes to my empty space? How could God leave me alone to deal with this pain? “When you are happy,” he writes, “so happy that you have no sense needing (God), so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside.” Later he writes, “Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect you don’t understand.” He was speaking out of the empty space, this N.W. Clerk, which was discovered years later to be a pseudonym for someone else – the real author’s name C.S. Lewis. The real author’s grief – the death of his wife Joy. The real author’s soul - an empty space we cannot fill.

Not that we don’t try. We try all kinds of things to fill the empty space. Ours or theirs. We try being busy. We try keeping active. We try an extra drink or two. We try mindless TV. We try eating too much. We try eating too little. We try giving advice. We all know the story of Job – the man who seemed to have it all, but before he knew it – everything was gone. His home, his family, his health. And Job was left alone with his empty space. And then come Job’s “friends” and for 35 chapters – they do their best to try to fill the empty space. They try to make sense of it all – they try to explain it all – they try to find blame and reason for it all. But it’s not working. The space is not getting filled. Then finally in the 38th chapter God begins to speak. And God begins to speak into Job’s empty space.

When I was a newly ordained pastor and installed in my first church in Philadelphia I went to visit an elderly woman whose husband of 55 years had died just a few months before my arrival. I

went to see her to see how she was doing, because a few folks had told me she wasn't doing well. She invited me into her home and we talked for a while and then she asked if I wanted to see Larry's room. Larry was her dead husband. Sure, I said. So she took me to Larry's study – and there it was just as it was when Larry had died. Nothing touched. Nothing moved. It was her empty space. "I'm not ready," she said. I'm not sure what I exactly told her, but I know it was something trite like, "Time heals all wounds," something like that that belied my youth and inexperience and discomfort with empty spaces. She patted my hand as if to say, "You don't understand." I visited her about once every three months and each time she would show me the room unchanged – until a year or so later. It was then after we had talked a while that she took me again to Larry's study – and she pointed out to me that the blanket on Larry's favorite chair was no longer there. She said, "I was sitting at breakfast the other day and God spoke to me. He spoke into my empty space and said, 'It's time.' So now I'm starting. And I gave Larry's blanket to my grandson. Because he would have wanted that." With every visit afterward – she showed me another change – another way God had spoken into her empty space.

So Jesus pays a visit to a well in the middle of Samaria – Jacob's Well – and he engages a woman there at the well, a Samaritan woman, in a conversation. There are all sorts of cultural reasons why Jesus shouldn't be having this conversation with this Samaritan woman – men don't talk to women, Jews don't talk to Samaritans, etc., etc. But there Jesus is speaking to this Samaritan woman. And they have this interesting conversation around water and buckets and living water and worship and spirit and truth and Jews and Samaritans – but in the middle of it all Jesus tells her to go get her husband. And she says that she has no husband. It's an awkward moment. And Jesus speaks into the awkward moment and says – "I know. Truth is you've had five husbands and the man you are living with now is not your husband." And now all of a sudden we see that this woman has an empty space. And the woman responds, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

Now the interesting thing about this empty space inside this woman is what history and tradition has tried to do to fill it. Jesus tells us that she has this empty space resulting from having

been married several times and now living with a man without benefit of marriage – and what tradition has done to fill the empty space is to label her an immoral and loose woman. It's easy to fill someone else's empty space with that kind of label. Forget the cause, just call her a sinner. But what we keep forgetting is that a first century Palestinian woman had no say in who she was married to. She had no say in matters of divorce. That was the man's prerogative. Women were property to be claimed and discarded upon the man's whim. So this was a woman who was either passed from one man to another or whose husbands died along the way and had yet to find a man who would remain loyal. Her empty space, at the very least, was complicated and painful. It defied a label. And so for years she's come to the well alone with no one who quite understands and now in front of her was the one person who could see it for what it was and speak into it. The Jewish rabbi who came to her not with labeling judgment, but with the grace of living water ... to fill not the bucket in her hand, but the dry well inside her soul. The empty space.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Blessed? Did he say Blessed? We must be careful to know that Jesus does not wish the empty space upon us – love would never do that. It's just that he knows that to be a human being we all walk around with one, the "God-shaped vacuum" as Pascal called it. We all have a place that has been left empty by disappointment or failure or death or illness or hurt. We all have that room inside us where we go to mourn. We all have that space that is desperate for comfort. And Jesus says that comfort will come. That God will someday speak into the space. Maybe not today or tomorrow or next month. But God loves you enough to speak into the dry well inside you with an invitation of living water. Water that will quench the thirst of your parched soul. And it is likely not going to feel like a Hallmark card. It's likely not going to be like anything we expect. But God will speak in spirit and truth a word that will inhabit that space and in God's mysterious and surprising way will bring comfort.

Blessed are those who trust that. Blessed are those who wait for that. Blessed are those who resist the temptation to fill the space – yours or someone else's – with something that brings false comfort and trite formula.

Don Wardlaw, a retired professor from McCormick seminary, tells the story of going to his father's funeral. His father was a Presbyterian minister so at his funeral there were lots of folks who came to him to tell him of what his father's ministry had meant to them. One of them was the custodian who had once worked for his father. The man had moved away but had returned for the funeral. He came to Don and said, "You dad was very important and special to me." "Oh, I know, Leon; you were very important to him." "No, no ... you don't understand," said Leon, "I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for your dad. I wouldn't have made it through that horrible night." "What horrible night?" Don asked. "During the time that your dad was pastor of this church and he and I worked together here, you probably don't remember this because you were a little boy, but my wife died suddenly. She was only thirty-four years old. She was hanging out clothes on the line. She had a massive heart attack. She didn't even make it to the hospital alive. We had four small kids. I will never forget that day. I was just devastated. I was so emotionally drained that I fell across the bed. I remember lying in the bed and it had gotten dark. I looked up at one point and I could see your dad had come into the room and was sitting in a rocking chair beside my bed rocking. He didn't say a thing. He just sat there rocking. All night long I would wake up and I would reach over to where my wife usually was and I would feel that emptiness. The pain would shoot through me like a thousand arrows. And I wondered how in the world can I go on? And then out of the corner of my eye I would see him rocking, rocking. It was the rocking that helped me make it through the night."

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