

The Power of Naught

I Kings 17:1-16; Mark 12:41-44

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At a church meeting a very wealthy man rose to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith.

“I am a millionaire,” he said, “and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I remember that turning point in my faith. I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had that one dollar bill in my pocket and I had either to give it all to God’s work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar—everything I had—to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today.”

He finished and there was an awed silence at his testimony as he moved toward his seat. As he sat down, a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over to him and said, “I dare you to do it again.”

No kidding, Bob Dylan was right, “When you ain’t got nothin’, you got nothin’ to lose.”

Let’s talk about Zero. You remember Zero. It comes from the Middle Ages, from the cross-pollination from the Crusades. Zero is Arabic, along with arithmetic and algorithm. The rest of the world has mostly used letters for numbers: remember Roman numerals, which is a counting system of letters, and they also used letters in Greek and Hebrew, and I think also in Chinese. Zero, if you remember, is unique in that it signifies nothing, but in such a way that it is also a placeholder, and by its placement can increase things by tenfold or a hundredfold or a thousandfold. A powerful little nothing to be sure!

Remember how hard it was to add and subtract, let alone multiply or divide, in Roman numerals? Or how hard to calculate, say, times (a minute and a half on your microwave isn’t 1.5, it’s 130 seconds, or 1 and 30) or, if you’re old enough to remember, English money, or anything that doesn’t operate on the decimal system. (On the plus side, maybe that’s why it was an English mathematician who came up with calculus.)

So, zero revolutionized mathematics, and in a real way, made the science and art of mathematics possible in the first place. And then when computers came along, zero became one-half of all the possibilities. The binary system, upon which computers operate, is simply 1 and 0, or speaking electrically, on and off.

Without zero, you wouldn't have your I-pod or your HDTV, let alone your telephone or your car or...just about any of the trappings of life that the rest of the world wants, and that here in America we take for granted, no matter how we may feel about them. You wouldn't be able to add up a bill or balance your checkbook (if anybody even does that any more) or get your money from the ATM—it goes on and on.

Well, in today's title I used the old King James English word for nothing: *Naught*. Sounds more poetic, but it also sounds more, well, absolutely *barren*, NAUGHT, because of course I wanted to underscore not mathematical zero but a more existential *nothing* (*pace* Heidegger). I wanted to talk to you not about the importance of arithmetic in today's world, and how you'd better do your math homework or you'll never get a job, but about your inner life.

How is that going for you these days? Your inner life, I mean. Is it on or is it off? How is it going for the Body of Christ?

Elijah and the widow of Zarephath are not too different from us, really. They are quite modern, if you listen to them. They are both pretty cynical about life and the raw deal they feel they are getting. Kind of like Job's wife, if it comes to that. Remember Job's wife: "Curse God and die?"

Okay, here's your history: the prophet Elijah lived in the time of King Ahab, 869-850 B.C. Ahab's father had married him off to Jezebel, who before she was Bette Davis in a red dress was a princess of a neighboring kingdom (that's what marriage was all about in those days), and Jezebel's kingdom followed Ba'al, the big god of the ancient world. Most of the story of Elijah has to do with battling to keep idolatry and apostasy out of the kingdom of Judah. In fact, Elijah's very name means "the LORD—Jah (short for Yahweh)—is my God (Eli means my god). And of course we don't have any idolatry or apostasy (that's falling away from God) in our own time.

And then, as you know, in the time of Jesus there was a huge and extremely visible gap between the unbelievably wealthy and the inconceivably

poor, there was military violence against defenseless people—just remember Herod’s soldiers in the Temple mingling the blood of the faithful with the blood of their sacrifices (Luke 14), and natural disaster (the tower that fell to the ground in the district of Siloam). And of course we don’t have anything like that today either.

And then there are the people in Fort Hood. My friend Laurie, whom you will meet and with whom I got to spend a couple of days this week on study leave, is there with them now. She got the call from Presbyterian Disaster assistance while we were in Cleveland, had to find a substitute preacher and get somebody to do a wedding for her, but they called her, she’s probably the only disaster specialist in the denomination who grew up in a military family and also has experience dealing with gun violence, and she is there supporting that poor pastor, who is part of the community and overwhelmed right along with the people she serves.

And what they must have there, what it must feel like, if we remember how we felt on September 11, is a vast sense of...nothingness. Suspended animation. *Tohu vavohu*, as it says at the beginning of Genesis. Isn’t that what happens? One of the preachers I heard in the last few days talked about the experience of being “Saturday Christians.” After Friday, the agony and humiliation and death, the terrifying lightning and rending of the curtain, and then...nothing. The Sabbath, whose very name means “ceasing,” but not a Sabbath of refreshment but a Sabbath of emptiness and despair. No resurrection yet, just...emptiness and nothingness, as the cosmos was before God began to create.

And yet they, and yet we, are still alive—empty of everything—which, paradoxically, makes us completely open. Not that I think the tragedies of life are God’s will, but as the expression goes, Nature abhors a vacuum, and something spiritual will rush in, just the way...well, let’s try something.

All of you breathe out. Really empty your lungs.....now stay that way. Stay there with your lungs deflated, completely empty... okay, I don’t want any of you to turn blue, let the air in again...so you see how the breath will rush in if you try to empty your lungs for too long.

What we strive to do is to make sure that the spirit that rushes in is not a spirit of cynicism or despair or violence, but the Spirit of the Lord.

The Apostle Paul talks about living our lives “*hos me,*” “as if not.” As if we were not sad, or depressed, or despairing. As if we had no cares and no possessions. As if there were nothing to be afraid of in this world, although of course for many there is. But it’s a spiritual discipline: wearing life, as the saying goes, like a loose garment.

Matthew Fox writes about the *Via Negativa* in medieval spirituality—the way of Nothingness, the way of the Void. It is a style of prayer in which we listen instead of talking. I commend it to you. I used to think I prayed really well, but then I realized I was doing all the talking. How about a little silence in the prayer moment, especially from us humans: is there a word from the Lord?

I think we have a great future ahead of us, discovering how empty space makes room for the Love of God...and how do you say zero in tennis? *Love*. And of course *love* in tennis comes from French *l’oeuf*—the Egg (*fingers making egg/zero shape*). New Beginnings.

So you see there is great power in Naught. There is great power, as Jesus showed us, in self-emptying, in giving up even our lives for his sake, for the glory of God. There is great power in living a Saturday faith. Do we *want* to do it? Of course not. But I dare us to do it again...right now.

AMEN.