

Emptiness

Our spiritual formation begins not with fullness, but with emptiness. That's the way we follow Jesus who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

-Joshua Choonmin Kang

OUR HOPE, IN LENT, IS TO BREAK THROUGH to another level, a deeper level in the spiritual life. But how? The words of Pastor Joshua Choonmin Kang offer us a clue. We must begin not with fullness but with emptiness.

Kang teaches that emptiness is the right beginning point in the spiritual life. We must give things up in order to receive Christ. We must set out, as Abraham did, from the old homeland, and go in obedience to God to another place.

This is a moving idea, especially when voiced by Kang who is far from his native land of Korea. But no, the meaning is far beyond geography. Beginning with emptiness means being willing and open to change. How can we apply this idea-that of beginning with emptiness to our own lives?

Often the things we give up in Lent are only tokens. In secret, we are holding on for dear life to the things that make us secure: our homes, our possessions, our community status, our bank accounts. But Jesus calls us to abandon things, to clear space for a new way of living. Are we willing to do this? It is risky, that's for sure.

In the lives of holy people we hear many stories of giving possessions away. Francis of Assisi, we are told, gave up all his clothing and walked naked through the streets of the town. This makes a good story, but it sounds a bit unbalanced in this day and age.

Jesus told his disciples to drop their nets and follow him, to abandon their fathers and mothers and their wives, not even to pause for such honorable duties as burying their parents. Such radical cases of letting go are well authenticated in Scripture. The trick is to know how to interpret the meaning for our own lives.

Jesus wants us to open our hands and hearts for the grace he will send us. He asks us to examine our dependencies, the things we are attached to. Sometimes these dependencies are so obvious, they're staring us in the face. But sometimes we are blind to the things that drag us down. We are pinned down by our attachments. We think our lives are full, but we're deluding ourselves. The fullness is just an overburdened, complicated life.

Just as Henri Nouwen left Harvard to live with the handicapped, just as

Charles Colson left Washington politics to start a prison ministry, just as Mother Teresa left Europe and went to India to serve the poor, we should look for our own points of departure, our emptying. We should not indulge in "copycat" spirituality, trying to do just what Nouwen or Colson or Mother Teresa did. We should reflect on our own lives and let go.

We should shed the attachments that pin us down and prevent us from surrendering ourselves to Christ's love. We should shed the attachments that pin us down and hem us in. Nobody else knows what they are quite as well as we do.

These are the secrets of the spiritual life: letting go, relinquishing, emptying ourselves, so that our hearts can be made full and whole.