

I brought a wheelbarrow to church today. This may seem like a very strange thing to have in church, but it is an excellent object to help us understand the second reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

A wheelbarrow is a very handy tool. You can use it for all sorts of things. It is strong, and it can make hauling heavy things like dirt or rocks or firewood easy. It is also large so it can haul bulky things like sticks or leaves. You can also use a wheelbarrow for mixing things, like soil for plants or concrete for a small project.

Wheelbarrows are fairly easy to push and maneuver. You can steer them around tight corners, go frontward or backward, and bump across uneven ground. Wheelbarrows are also easy to dump. You can easily dump from the front or either side. Perhaps wheelbarrows are too easy to dump. Who hasn't loaded one too heavily only to have it tip over and dump everything!

Yes, wheelbarrows are very handy tools. In one day you may use a wheelbarrow for yard work, garden work, and barn work; loading and unloading it many times with many different things.

Some people even like to use wheelbarrows as flowerbeds. These might be cute, but once you've starting growing things in a wheelbarrow you've defeated the purpose for why it was made! You can't really haul firewood in a wheelbarrow that's growing marigolds! And that thought brings us to our Bible reading from Philippians.

In Philippians 2:6-11 we find words often called the "Christ Hymn". In Greek these words flow like poetry. Many scholars believe these words did not originate with Paul, but are a hymn the early church used to sing. This is probably one of the earliest Christian songs created. Verse 6 and the beginning of verse 7 say, "[Jesus] thought he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

It is the line, "emptied himself taking the form of a slave" where we connect with our wheelbarrow. A wheelbarrow planted full of flowers isn't much use as a wheelbarrow. The only way to use it to haul things again is if you empty it; dump out the flowers! Similarly the only way Jesus could be our Savior was to empty himself of his heavenly glory. Then and only then could he make room to take on the burdens of the world. He became a wheelbarrow of sorts, hauling all the world's sin and pain and

brokenness in himself. It was only by emptying himself completely of all his glory that he could have enough room to carry such a massive burden.

The Christ Hymn goes on: "And being found in human form [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Just like an empty wheelbarrow's ability to haul all sorts of stuff, so was Jesus able to haul every sort of sin away from us. It is a wonderful gift to have someone take your burdens from you. That is God's gracious gift to us.

Prior to the Christ Hymn in our reading Paul reminds the Philippians that they too are to have the mind of Christ. They too are to empty themselves just as Jesus did. And Paul's words to the Philippians go for us also.

It may seem bizarre to imagine yourself like a wheelbarrow, but the image fits. I said a couple minutes ago that a wheelbarrow that is growing flowers has become useless for hauling things. There simply isn't room. If you had to haul leaves in your yard, but your wheelbarrow was full of dirt, would you put the leaves on top of the dirt and try to push it around? Of course not! That would be ridiculous. You'd empty the dirt first! Then the wheelbarrow would be lighter and more

maneuverable. Yet there are many people whose lives are like a wheelbarrow full of dirt. They've accumulated lots of things that are heavy and take up space. They are unwilling to empty out these things to take on a different load.

I think we can group the "things" people accumulate into two categories: fear and greed.

Fear is one of the most powerful forces that drives people. People are afraid of their reputation or public image being damaged. People are afraid of being anything less than successful. People are afraid of what their friends or neighbors would think if they knew their struggles; or they are afraid of what would happen if events from their past were to become known. People are afraid their houses or possessions aren't safe. People are afraid of not having enough money for medical bills or retirement. People are afraid for their jobs and livelihoods. People are afraid that their children won't grow up well.

Some fears are healthy and good. They keep us from being too reckless. But many fears become burdens we bear, just like having a pile of dirt in a wheelbarrow. They limit a person's ability to do things. If you live life too safely then you will do nothing. The gospels show us that when Jesus came from heaven he wasn't driven by fear. He wasn't afraid of what people

thought of him. We wasn't afraid of ruffling feathers. He wasn't afraid of calling sin a sin. And so he was fully free for God's work.

The other category of "things" is greed. Some people always want to have more: more money, more power, more possessions. In their quest for comforts, entertainment, and luxuries they fill their wheelbarrows with massive loads. But they think this is okay. They believe that if they have the ability to accumulate it, they have the right to have it. If you spend all your time and all your money filling your life's wheelbarrow with stuff you want you certainly won't have room for God.

Perhaps one group of people isn't so much carrying a load in their wheelbarrows as they are worried about the appearance of the wheelbarrows themselves. If you bought a new wheelbarrow how useful would it be if you were afraid of scratching it, denting it, or letting it rust a little? It wouldn't be useful at all. You don't buy a wheelbarrow to look at it! You buy a wheelbarrow to use it! People who worship their bodies and put excessive amounts of effort into cosmetics, having a perfect figure, plastic surgeries, hair replacements, and a whole host of other things are really just trying the ridiculous task of keeping their wheelbarrows looking perfect.

Wheelbarrows aren't meant to look perfect. Wheelbarrows are

meant for work. Anything used for work is going to show the effects of that work in time. And God built you for work. The work God has for you is not crushing or cruel. God does not intend to abuse you. The work God has for you is meaningful and enriching. It is intended to give your life purpose, and give you a sense of importance. The work God has for you is God's invitation to you to work for His kingdom. It is an invitation to do something with everlasting value. There is no greater or more fulfilling work than that.

Just like a versatile wheelbarrow the work God has for you may change. The direction you go may change. The load may change. God built you to do many things so that you can help in many ways. A wheelbarrow may be dumped and loaded many times in the same day.

So the next time you pull out your wheelbarrow and put it to work, let it remind you of the Christ Hymn. Jesus emptied himself to carry the burden of the world upon himself. Unburden yourself of those things that reduce your capacity for God. The second reading from Philippians ends with these words, "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." May you find joy and satisfaction in God's tasks for you and may you always be ready to do the work God seeks to accomplish. Amen