

"Letting Go As Grace"

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Readings:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food or the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to the span of your life? ~ *Matthew 6: 25ff*

As you grow spiritually, you realize that your attempts to protect yourself from problems actually create more problems. The alternative is to decide not to fight with life. You realize and accept that life is not under your control. ... The stuff that holds you down periodically rears its head. When it does, let it go. Permit the pain to come up into your heart and pass through. If you do that, it will pass. Let it go then because it will be harder later. Always let it go as soon as you are aware you didn't. ~ *from The Untethered Soul by Michael A. Singer*

Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. Instead store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ~ *Matthew 6:19ff*

You will never find peace through a form of letting go that does not show understanding or discretion. To shave off one's hair, to change the color of your clothes, to leave one large home and acquire a small one and consider these to be renunciation – who teaches that? True letting go comes only when instead of feeling *I am the body, I am the body, I am the body* all the time, you begin to feel with the same conviction *I am the soul, I am the Spirit, I am the Self*. ~ *Swami Muktananda*

Better is one hand full of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind. ~ *Ecclesiastes 4:6*

God is a bubbling spring at the depths of one's own being which, though it may be overlaid and obscured by various kinds of debris, keeps indefatigably welling up from within. ~ *from Spiritual Guidance by John Yungblut*

Sermon - Last May, Larry and Andy and I spent a morning brainstorming worship themes for this year. We were playing around with the word "Grace" and suddenly tagged into the idea of "Melodies of Grace" for our Lenten theme. I have the notes from that morning and under "Melodies of Grace" are these thoughts: forgiveness, Amish grace, surrender and letting go, que sera sera and the Cotton Patch Gospel musical. If you look at this month's newsletter or if you've been coming to church these past four Sundays, you know which ideas made the cut for this Lenten season. Surrender and letting go got on the list because someone in this congregation e-mailed ideas for themes, of which this was one. When the ideas and the Sundays got divided up among the three of us, letting go was next to my name for this Sunday. So I've had

ten months to ponder about it. And, during that time, the global recession and the huge impact it has on all of our lives, has caused all of us to look at issues of letting go in ways we wouldn't have dreamed of five years ago. It's no accident that the theme of our church retreat this year is "What Really Matters."

Now there are basically two types of sermons that I preach. The first is a sermon about an idea or practice that I know about, that I've studied, that has helped me, that now comes easily enough for me that I'm excited to share it with you. The second kind of sermon is about an idea or practice that I'm not so familiar with or that is difficult enough for me that I really need to preach it to myself. Today, this is that second kind of sermon.

What I want to do this morning is offer to you four ways of considering what it means, in a spiritual context, to let go – to let go of parts of oneself, parts of one's life, to relinquish control, to surrender to God or to the Spirit or to life itself. In a culture that has been fixated on the dominant foursome of money, power, prestige, and indulgence, in a country whose basic tenets include the right to the pursuit of happiness which in the past two decades has often been seen by us as material gain and possessions, the idea of letting go seems a bit foreign and - quite honestly – it can make me uneasy. I take my own discomfort with the topic as a sign that it is an important issue for me to visit.

The first, and probably most familiar, way to talk about letting go as a spiritual practice is in the context of releasing something from our past. We do this often in our Lenten practices here at UCG. This year, those of us who are following the path of the Ash Wednesday services, have these small packages of seeds. We've been asked to think of something we need to let go of, something for which we need to forgive ourselves or to accept forgiveness from someone else or from God. I've been doing this Lenten focus for the past five weeks. I've zeroed in on the issue. It's something from my past I want to forgive myself for, some things that I did and some things that I didn't do that affected both of my then newly adult sons. It's been hanging around in my psyche and prayers for about seventeen years, and I've decided it's time to let it go. I will take my packet of seeds, probably on Palm Sunday afternoon, and scatter them, giving them back to the earth as a symbol of my forgiveness and of letting this thing go at last. Whether it's releasing our anger, our guilt, our resentment, or our pain, this kind of letting go is a good spiritual practice. I recommend it as a way of releasing those things that we do not need to carry around with us any longer.

Another kind of letting go relates to the things in life that we cannot control. I think Jesus is speaking about this kind of control when he asks, can any of you by worrying add a single hour to the span of your life? Now, on the Myers-Briggs Personality Scale, I am an SJ which in short means that I'm a practical grounded planner, like everyone else in my family of origin. So I am both genetically bred and psychologically programmed to be a detail person, a planner, an organizer. Taking control is my first impulse, my natural defense response in uncertainty. It's as natural for me as breathing in a gulp of air when I surface from swimming underwater. A huge part of my spiritual learning and growth in the last decade has been an increasing awareness of what I can't control.

An easy example I can give you is about the Retreat. If you know me, you know that I love Retreat, you know that I find great joy in taking all the individual components of Retreat and pulling them together so that they connect in one great and wonderful week-end event. When there were about 100 people on Retreat, and we all fit into South Camp, it was a fascinating and fun organizational challenge. As the Retreat has grown to about 270 folks and as we've spilled over into both North Camp and the Conference area, I've had to accept a certain loss of control. As someone who manages even her difficult learnings by making a plan for them, I now have a plan that I follow every year. I get to Retreat early on Friday afternoon. I meet with the camp staff; I get all my stuff where it needs to go; I check out the buildings and make sure everything is in place; and then I go down to the end of the dock. I hold out my hands like this; I remember all the people and all the planning and all the time that has gone into creating this Retreat and I picture all of that on my hands. Then I pray. I say, "OK God, here it is, this Retreat. I've done everything I can do to bring it to fruition and now I'm letting it go, I'm turning it over to you, God – it's yours. Hold this Retreat, hold all those who come here, hold me in your light and let your spirit of Grace bless us all." Then I physically imagine sliding the Retreat out of my hands and into God's realm. That's what it takes for me to let go, to let God, to let it be.

Recognizing and accepting the parts of life that are not under my control releases me, as Mickey Singer says, from that constant inner dialogue of either trying to figure out how to keep certain things from happening or trying to figure out what to do because they did happen. All those attempts to protect myself from problems I can't control just create more problems. So the practice is letting go, letting go, as soon as I'm conscious, aware of what is going on.

Now there's a side note about this kind of letting go and letting God, that has always bothered me. It's where letting go runs head on into and can blur with the ways that some people use the concept of God's will. So let me tell you how I reconcile the "Letting God" with what I believe about God's will. To do that I have to share what I don't believe. So often God's will is used as a bludgeon on people, especially in times of tragedy and death. The best response I've ever heard to that was William Sloane Coffin's answer to the woman, who after Coffin's son Alex had died, said something to Coffin about Alex's death being God's will. Coffin replied very clearly, "Do you think it was God's will that my son had too many drinks that night? Do you think it was God's will that the rain was coming down in sheets of water, that the windshield wiper in his car was broken and that the guardrail on the side of the bridge was gone? No ma'am, it was not God's will – and when Alex's car sank into Boston Harbour, God's heart was the first to break."

At other times, the concept of God's will is used as an excuse by people who don't want to take responsibility for their own needs and decisions. Ministers are notorious for this; in fact, I've heard one Baptist minister say "Funny how God's will never seems to call a minister to a church that pays less." The concept of God's will has been cheapened so often for me that it is sometimes hard for me to say, "Let go and let God." I believe that God's will is always for our wholeness and our healing, and

when we can let go in ways that open us and open others to those paths of healing and wholeness, then I can reconcile these two concepts and say "Let go and Let God".

A third kind of letting go is what in yoga and in Eastern thought is called letting go of wrong identification. Who am I? Am I a mother, a grandmother? Yes. Am I a friend, a wife, a daughter? Yes. Am I a minister? Yes. Am I now an Ordained minister?! Yes! Yes, I am all of those things, but individually and even collectively, they are not all that I am. I, the true me, is not defined or limited by any of those identifications. And every one of them has changed and will continue to change in the course of my life time. Life teaches us this kind of letting go in very clear examples, as a parent dies, as a child grows up, as friendships change, as a job is lost, as retirement comes. These temporal, mortal labels and experiences I have are not all that I am; my true nature is more than that. Jesus says it this way, "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be, so don't store your treasures in things that are temporal and can be destroyed." Swami Muktananda says true letting go comes with identifying ourselves with our soul, with the true spiritual being we are, the bubbling spring that wells up within us that is God, that is eternal.

This IS letting go of our attachment to defining ourselves by the roles we have with others and with the world. To me, it does not mean giving up the beauty or joy of this world; it does not mean giving up the grace and meaning of our loving relationships; it does not mean to giving up the calling of our work and service in the world. I've known folks who identify themselves more with their detachment from the world than I will ever identify myself with my attachment to my house or even with my work. It is all about the way we see ourselves, about how we look at things, how we have things, and about how tightly we hold on.

Mary Oliver, in her poem "In Blackwater Woods," expresses this letting go beautifully for me. She says:

Every year, everything I have ever learned
in my lifetime leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss whose other side
is salvation, whose meaning none of us will ever know.
To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal,
to hold it against your bones
knowing that your own life depends on it;
and when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

That resonates for me: whether it's the people in my life who are mortal, whether it's my role as a daughter or my role as a minister, whether it's my own life – all these are to be loved, enjoyed, held close – and all of them in time will end, all those I will have to let go, including my own body. So who am I then? Can I learn to see the eternal parts of me, the soul, the Spirit, the true Self? And how do I enter that way of seeing?

By practice, my friends. By the practices of daily life, by learning to live in some balance between the roles I have and the essence of who I am. By the practice of

letting go in the small things and events of my life. By the practice of looking at a situation or a person and saying, "I can't control that, so I need to let go of the notion that I can or I might or I should." By practicing over and over again, letting go in all the changes and seasons of life.

As I was talking with Isabelle Winzeler last week, she offered an image of living our lives that was very helpful to me. It is the image of a bird; we are like a bird with two wings. One of our wings is for flapping, for working hard for what matters, for all that we can do and believe in, for those things where we need to do our part to make things work. We flap our wing. The other wing is the one that lets go and soars on the winds of grace. We need both wings; we need to keep them in balance; and we need to remember that this is a lifelong task. It's not something we do one day – and then have it perfected. It is a decision we make again every morning, a decision we make every day of our lives. To paraphrase Mark Nero, "the nature of becoming human is a constant filming over of our essence while the nature of being is a constant erosion of what is not essential. We each live in the midst of this ongoing tension, but with an incorruptible spot of the grace of God at our core."

Please join me now in a Meditation, a practice of Letting Go:

Sit comfortably – relax head, neck, arms, hands, feet, leave your eyes open but let them go a bit soft, breathe in calm – breathe out any tension you are holding – breathe in and out. Focus on your breath, in and out, let any thoughts that arise just move along and let them go.

Now just glance out the window or look at the worship center without moving your head. Just glance and notice that you are effortlessly aware of all the objects that are in the scope of your vision – the colors, the variations of light, the grain of wood, the architecture, the trees. Notice that you take this all in at once without thinking about it. This is your consciousness, your center of awareness, deeper than thoughts.

Close your eyes and keep breathing in and out. Who are you? You are the one who sees, the one who hears, from way back inside you somewhere, aware of all that happens, aware of your thoughts. You are the one who can tell your mind to say silently the word "hello" right now. You are that one, that soul, and if you can grasp this awareness, then you know that this is where you truly live, who you really are. You are not your body, not your thoughts, not your actions. The eternal you is aware that you are aware, it is the seat of Self, where your true spiritual eternal soul resides.

Breathe in and out, in this place of letting go, in this place of deep awareness, and when you are ready, open your eyes and return slowly.

As swimmers dare to lie face up to the sky and the water bears them,
as hawks rest in flight and the air sustains them,
so, O God, I pray to learn to let go
and float into Your Creative Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing that no effort on my part
earns your all-surrounding grace.

~ adapted from a poem by Denise Levertov