

“LEARNING TO LET GO”

Matthew 16:21-26

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

I shall always remember the story a friend of mine tells about helping his daughter learn to ride a bicycle. When his little girl first got her two-wheeler, he would walk alongside the bicycle to guide her, and help her to keep her balance. As time went on, she got more and more confident. One day as he was hanging on to the bicycle, my friend realized that if his daughter was ever going to learn to ride, he was going to have to let go. To let go meant that she might fall. The pavement was hard, and skinning her knees was a real possibility. Furthermore, she didn't want him to let go. But one afternoon she got to pedaling so fast that dad couldn't keep up with her. All of a sudden the little girl realized that she was riding on her own. All of a sudden my friend realized that he had let go!

Anyone who is a parent or who has worked with children knows that all of us have to learn when to hang on and when to let go. **Learning to let go** starts when a child is — oh, say — a year old. Baby's first step is such an exciting moment for parents. Yet it is a bittersweet moment, for with each baby step the child moves away from the protection of his or her parents, and toward the independence that is scary at best. Yet if baby is going to learn to walk, we must eventually let go — first with the whole hand, then with the finger, and then watch nervously as the child teeters and totters on those rubbery legs, and eventually walks on his own.

What a traumatic moment it is when the first day of school arrives, not only for a child, but for mom and dad! On the one hand, it is exciting to see a child growing up. But as she walks down the school corridor for the first time, the child enters a different world and things are never again the same.

Learning to let go is difficult for parents when it comes time to get the Driver's License. Can you trust a sixteen year old person behind the wheel of thousands of dollars of machinery? Probably not! But part of the ritual of growing up in our culture is learning how to drive. You can't learn to drive unless you get in the car and hold the steering wheel and apply the brakes and push the accelerator yourself.

Learning to let go is hard for many of us when we graduate from high school. We have spent so much time in that building we feel as if we belong there. We know the expectations of our teachers, and we are comfortable with our friends. Oh, we talk about reunions and get together, but once we graduate, it's never the same. Once we go across the stage and get our diploma, we must learn to let go.

It was a sad and happy day when we packed up our sons and took them off to college, first Tim, then Steve. They adjusted all right. It was a little harder on dad! They had grown up so soon. The house was suddenly hauntingly quiet. I wouldn't have wanted them to stay home,

but how hard it was to see them go.

When we get married, how hard it is to let go! Marriage often means leaving family and friends in another city, another church, another place of employment. It sometimes means making a break with those we love so much, and this is difficult for parents and children alike. How often I have heard parents say, "But Dr. Yoost, my daughter is too young to get married! My son is not ready for marriage!" You're probably right! Marriage demands such a high level of maturity on the part of a man and a woman that I am convinced that few of us are truly prepared when we enter that covenant. We also find that many of the problems in marriage can be traced to parents who will not let go of their children, or to a spouse who cannot seem to let go of the role he played in the family from which he came.

We need to let go when we change jobs or retire. How difficult it is to see the office go on without us! How hard it is to do without an experienced employee that we have come to know and trust through the years. Yet time marches on, sometimes taking us where we might not choose to go. We must **learn to let go**.

We have to let go when those we love move away, for when we are called to change our place of residence because of job or health or family reasons. Once again this summer, we have said goodbye to several of our members. How hard it is to see those who have been such a big part of our community relocate to other parts of the country. Every time I see a moving van in front of a house, I get an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I know how difficult moving can be, and how long it sometimes takes to feel at home in a new place. When we move, there are ties which must be broken, and life patterns which have to be shifted. It is inevitable that there is a breaking away, some hard places to navigate when we move. Once again, we are called to let go.

We need to learn the delicate art of letting go when someone we love is terminally ill. We live in a culture which denies the reality of death. Yet we all know that death comes to all of us, and we would do better to talk about it than to avoid the issue. Some of the most tender moments I have shared in ministry have been with persons who are dying, and with families where a loved one is letting go of life. What a hard time all of us have in dealing with that reality.

I was still in seminary, working as a hospital chaplain, when a patient said to me, "My condition is serious, probably fatal." My first impulse was to say, "Oh, don't talk like that. Don't say that. You'll be up and out of here in no time." That would have moved the conversation from the very heavy subject of death to something more light and cheerful. Such a response would also have said to the patient that I did not want to face death and would rather evade the issue. The man wanted to talk about death, you see, about his fears and his faith and his concern for his family, and I tried to listen. But I must confess that talking about death with someone who is terminally ill was difficult for me then, and it is difficult for me now. It's difficult for all of us. We'd much rather avoid the sick room altogether, or if we go, talk about the flowers or the nice day or the beautiful view from the hospital window. All the while the person in the sick bed yearns to have someone help him or her in the struggle to let go of life. How much we want to hang on! How desperately we need to give those that we love permission to let go.

Learning to let go is not something that is unique to our time. Jesus told the disciples that they would need to let go in order for him to follow the path God intended for his life.

When Jesus started explaining that his mission would involve his own suffering and death, Peter rejected this notion vehemently. *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* But Jesus said to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Jesus rebuked Peter for trying to dissuade him from his mission in the world. He expressed disappointment with Peter for trying to hold him back, from trying to keep him from letting go. The word “Satan” means adversary or opponent. I think we can say that Satan is any force which seeks to deflect us from the way of God. Satan is any influence which seeks to make us turn our back on the hard way, the way of challenge which God sets before us.

What made it so difficult for Jesus, and what makes it so difficult for us when we need to let go, is that the temptation to stay in comfortable and familiar surroundings often comes from those who love us. Peter spoke as he did only because he loved Jesus so much that he could not bear to think of Jesus treading that lonely path and dying that awful death. As he tried to imagine life without Jesus, Peter knew that was the last thing in the world that he wanted.

When we love someone, our natural reaction is to want to hang on, to preserve the moment. In the 17th chapter of Matthew, after this discussion which is our Gospel lesson, Peter, James and John go with Jesus to the Mount of Transfiguration. “Let’s build a shrine here,” Peter says in essence, “So that we can preserve these feelings of joy and ecstasy that we have discovered by being with Jesus. We’ll build a temple here, so that we can just stay and continue to enjoy one another’s company.” You see, Peter was still having a hard time **learning to let go**.

We may react to the crisis of separation by becoming angry: angry with God for allowing this to happen; angry with the people who are leaving us; angry with ourselves for not being able to have more control over the situation. Even when an unexpected opportunity comes our way, we may feel more burdened than joyful because of the pain of separation we know inevitably lurks down the road.

Becoming angry with ourselves doesn’t solve anything. For so much of life is simply beyond our control. Being angry with others alienates them at a time when we need them the most. Being angry with God — well, God can handle it. We may blame God for the separations we have to face in this life. But after we are finished complaining, God is still there! The Bible teaches, and our experience confirms, that God does not abandon us in our hour of need, but is with us in ways we may not realize at the time. God is with us in the telephone calls of concern from neighbors and friends, the listening ear and understanding hearts of the special people in our lives. God is with us in our deepest thoughts and in our darkest hours. God is with us when we need help in **learning to let go**.

When Jesus told the disciples that he was about to suffer and die, their natural response was to say, *“No, not you, Lord!”* When we make a step of faith and move beyond familiar surroundings, friends and family can be counted on to say, “No, not you!” But there are times when in order to reach our full potential, love means taking a risk, and love means letting go. There are times when ties must be broken and life patterns must be shifted. There are times when all of us must **learn to let go**.

Today’s Gospel moves us from Peter’s shock that a cross is God’s will for Jesus to perhaps an even greater shock that a cross is God’s will for those who follow Jesus. The challenge that Jesus puts before us in “taking up the cross” is not so much that Jesus is asking us to carry a burden as it is that he is asking us to take a risk, to continually risk ourselves for

others. Seminary professor and preacher Tom Long says, “*Cross bearers forfeit the game of power before the first inning; they are never selected as ‘most likely to succeed.’ Cross bearers are dropouts in the school of self-promotion. They do not pick up their crosses as means for personal fulfillment, career advancement or self-expression; rather they ‘deny themselves’ and pick up their crosses, like their Lord, because of the needs of other people.*”⁽¹⁾

After Jesus shared with Peter and the others that he was moving on, he challenged the disciples to let go of some things in their own lives. He said that in order to really grasp life in all its fullness, we have to let go of the petty things that keep us boxed in and limited in our perspective. Only God can satisfy the deepest yearnings of the human heart. Hanging on to our own agenda keeps us from embracing the plans and dreams that God has for us. Only when we let go of our narrow understanding of what gives life meaning are we free to pursue a life that cannot be taken away. That’s what Jesus is saying to us.

The Chinese word for crisis is made up of two symbols: the character for **danger** and the character for **opportunity**. Letting go is a crisis, as I have already said. The danger is that we will lose our perspective and become bitter and cynical. But letting go is also an opportunity for new growth and fulfillment. Every time we are confronted with one of life’s challenges, we are given the opportunity to **let go and let God**.

All of us will eventually lose those nearest and dearest to us. They will grow up, they will move away, or they will die. All this talk about letting go may sound mighty depressing. But in final analysis, life is not about separation and loss, but about drawing closer and closer to the One who gives life meaning and purpose and value. It is about drawing closer to the One who never lets go of us, the One who will never leave us nor forsake us no matter what may come our way.

The little girl learned how to ride a bicycle because her dad was willing to hang on to her and help her get started. He did it because he loved her. Eventually, because he loved her, he **learned to let go** and to trust that she was in God’s hands. May God help each of us to learn when to hang on, and when to let go.

Prayer: Dear God, just as Jesus came to the disciples with the shocking and alarming news that he would be leaving them and they would have to let go, so we believe that there are times when you come into our lives with news that we must let go of those we love, and that we must let go of our own plans and ambitions in order to be the people you want us to be. Help us to know when to hang on and when to let go. Help us to trust you in every situation of life. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Note:

1. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 36., No. 3., p. 38.