

Sermon – “Letting Go”

Sunday, May 10, 2015

Scripture Readings – Deuteronomy 32:10-12, John 13:33-35, 14:25-27

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 32, is a small portion of Moses’ Song prior to his death and the people’s entering the Promised Land. This is a time of letting go for Moses and the people he has led for 40 years. Moses’ task has been completed and the people’s future will be shaped by the choices they will make. Moses compares Yahweh’s leading of the Israelites to the care a mother eagle gives her young, gently stirring and encouraging them to learn how to fly on their own and sustaining them through the learning process. This is the Word of God.

10 God sustained him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; God shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of God’s eye. 11 As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is found in the Gospel of John, from chapters 13 and 14. These selected verses are a part of Jesus’ farewell discourse. This is a time of letting go for Jesus and his disciples who have become like little children to him. In his concern about what will happen in his absence, Jesus teaches about the Advocate which the Father will send in his name. This passage offers the most highly developed thought in the New Testament on the role and personality of the Holy Spirit; and provides the biblical seeds, which grew over the next three centuries into the Doctrine of the Trinity. Hear now God’s holy word.

33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

25 "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

The title of the sermon: Letting Go

The text: Little children, I am with you only a little longer. John 13:33a

Let us pray. Holy God, prepare each of us for the times in our lives when we are called to “let go” of the familiar and comfortable in order to grow. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Some of you remember my mom from a story I shared in the first sermon I delivered at Westminster a year and a half ago. When asked to describe marriage in three words on a cruise newlywed game while celebrating her 65th wedding anniversary with my father, she replied, without skipping a beat, “hills and valleys!”

Over those hills and valleys I traveled with her, before she let me go, my mom's quick wit instilled her no nonsense spirit within me. In a recent presentation to Presbyterian Women about factors contributing to me putting a crack in the stained glass ceiling, I shared some of the quips I learned from my mother.

Among them are: the importance of respect, giving it and receiving it. The best way to get the respect of others, according to my mother, is respecting yourself! She also taught me early on, "It is not how you feel, it is how you look!" so learn to put your best foot forward even when you don't feel like it. And when choosing a life partner, she retorted without apology, "Beauty fades, but dumb lasts forever!" Don't limit your choice to outward appearances, learn the heart and mind of the one with whom you choose to spend a lifetime. And when I was in my early thirties and had not found that person yet, she reminded me, "The only thing worse than being single and wishing you were married, Blythe, is being married and wishing you were single."

We all seek to give our children bits and pieces of wisdom before they grow up and we let them go. In our gospel reading today, Jesus talks to his disciples before he is asked to let them go in his pending death. *Little children*, he says in his farewell discourse, *I am with you only a little longer*. The final words of wisdom Christ chose to give his beloved disciples is about the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send following his death.

In the gift of the Holy Spirit, which we commemorate on Pentecost Sunday two weeks from today, God's presence in Jesus is no longer limited to one person in one time and one place. God's spirit, which cannot be seen, can live within believers' hearts to strengthen, sustain and empower them in the choices they make through the hills and valleys that are a part of life.

If we explore the encounters between Jesus and his followers from that first Easter morning until Pentecost, we begin to understand that the season of Easter is a time of 'letting go' as well as a time of a new beginning. Remember Christ's words to Mary who was the first to encounter the Risen Lord.

Do not hold on to me, he says to his beloved friend, *I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your father, to my God and your God.'*

Instead of holding on Mary is encouraged to let go. She is asked to relay a message which will help the disciples understand the words Jesus spoke only a few days prior to his death. *Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the counselor will not come to you, but if I go, the Father will send him to you.*

The disciples initially reject these words just as we reject the idea that it is to our advantage for someone we love to be absent from us. And yet, as Henri Nouwen points out in his book The Living Reminder, one of the great mysteries of life is that memory can often bring us closer to each other than can physical presence. In memory we see each other in a new way with a deeper appreciation. Part of the beauty of our faith in a Triune God is that *God entered into intimacy with us not only by Jesus' coming, but also by his leaving. Indeed, it is in Christ's absence that our intimacy with God is so profound we can say God dwells in us, call God our food and drink and experience God as the center of our being.*

Jesus' leaving and letting go makes possible a new dimension of God's presence in our lives through the Holy Spirit. However, Jesus' leaving and letting go also affirms that we have a God who understands the necessary losses that are a part of each of our lives.

In her book Necessary Losses, Judith Viorst proposes that loss is universal and unavoidable. *We lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. Our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but also our illusions and expectations about them and ourselves.* Viorst contends that it is through our losing and leaving and letting go that we grow into and become the person God intends. When it is time to let go, will we have the courage and grace to do so? And how will we understand and interpret the losses we experience along the way?

Both Jesus and Moses, when they were asked to lose and to leave and to let go, allude to parenting metaphors, my little children and the mother eagle stirring her nest. They felt the anguish that every parent feels when it's time to let go. This anguish is magnified seven times seventy when the letting go and separation is untimely because of a death or divorce. However, even when there are no interruptions, time marches on, children grow up and leave home to make a life for themselves. Letting go is essential and healthy.

In fact a mother's ability to separate from her child is crucial for the child's individuation in human growth and development. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard describes a mother's love, which knows when to hold on and when to let go in this way.

The loving mother teaches her child to walk alone. She is far enough from him so that she cannot actually support him, but she holds out her arms to him. ...Her face beckons like a reward, an encouragement. Thus, the child walks alone with his eyes fixed on his mother's face, not on the difficulties of his way. He supports himself by the arms that do not hold him, and constantly strives towards the refuge of his mother's embrace, little suspecting that in the very same moment that he is emphasizing his need of her, he is proving that he can do without her, because he is walking alone.

May we, as mothers, as fathers, as teachers, as caregivers and as friends; have the courage to teach our children to walk alone. May we have the wisdom to know when to hold on and when to let go. And as we walk alone ourselves, grateful for those who have taught us how, may we know the comfort and strength of God's sustaining and Holy Spirit, like the murmur of a dove's song. Amen.