

Toronto United Mennonite Church  
Advent IV, 2016  
"Letting Go"  
(Joshua 5: 9-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)  
by Jeff Taylor

Pastor Marilyn has sometimes used the term "showing my work" at the start of a sermon, letting us in on her methods and starting assumptions to help us better follow along. I'm going to do that now because I am giving myself permission to do some things differently. I did a bit of letting go in preparation for this sermon by reducing my usual focus on the historical context of these bible texts. I didn't go to the Kelley Library at St. Mikes, I didn't read 50 pages from the Hermeneia series bible commentary, I didn't look at any maps - okay, I peeked at one, but I didn't bring any to show. I am trusting we have a good enough sense of the historical context of these texts that we won't go too far astray. I made that change in focus to make room for other ways of hearing the Spirit in holy text - ways that the bible writers themselves used, standing in a long rabbinic tradition of deploying the imagination in reading the bible - making connections of language, symbol, geography, numbers; all sorts of methods to make ancient holy text come alive and be useful in their time.

You may hear some of that this morning, but basically I'm asking permission of these texts to hear in them what needs to be heard, and I'll invite you to hear what you need to hear. I am taking from these texts theme of "letting go." I am letting go this morning; letting go and looking for grace. As the founder of Daoist philosophy, Lau Tzu, put it, "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might [yet] be. When I let go of what I have, I receive what I need."

The wandering band of escaped Egyptian slaves that Joshua led out of the Sinai desert and onto the west side of the Jordan river were letting go of what they had. They had already let go of the misery, boredom and secure predictability of their lives as slaves. Now they were letting go of the incomprehensible provision their God had made for them while they had wandered the Sinai. The manna that fell from the heavens, water gushing from rocks, inexplicably appearing flocks of tasty quail, miraculous healing of snake bites, the protective pillar of cloud and fire - everything that an entire generation had depended on for life they let go of at a place they called Gilgal - possibly related to the Hebrew word for "I remove," as in "Here I remove the indignity of your slavery."

First they circumcised the generation that had been born in the desert and had missed the initial ritual at the time of the exodus. Then they ate the passover meal for the first time (it seems) since they ate it before death passed them over in Egypt, and before they passed over the Red sea. Now, having passed over the Jordan they eat it again in the land Abraham had been aiming for in the first place, perhaps some 500 years earlier. They were able to eat the passover because they were finally in a land with grain to make the unleavened bread. In circumcision and the passover they were renewing their settlement in Canaan, renewing their covenant to commit themselves and their decedents to God, and renewing their trust and dependence on God in another land where they would continue to face the angel of death. They performed remembrances of their old world as they

entered their new world, shifting their concept of themselves as they let go of the disgrace of their slavery.

The story of the prodigal son invites various kinds of letting go as well. It is the last in a set of three parables Jesus tells responding to pharisees' complaints about the low quality of the people he associates with. In the first parable, a low class shepherd recovers a lost sheep. In the second, a woman (low class by definition) finds a lost coin. In both cases there is a party to celebrate afterwards. This last parable ends with a celebration as well but with a twist. The first two stories are simple, set in peasant homes with lost objects that are without culpability: a sheep and a coin cannot be blamed for being lost.

But the third story is more complex, taking place in the sort of home with the sort of people the pharisees would rather Jesus hung out with - the home of a respectable and Godly aristocrat. And the lost one is very much culpable for his own lostness; and the party has a twist. You know the story, son number two asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive - a huge insult; he blows all the money and ends up so hungry that he's prepared to compete with unclean animals for their food; then he "comes to himself" and decides to ask his father to take him back as a servant. Upon seeing the returning son dad runs to him (surrendering his own dignity) and before the boy can finish his repentance speech dad is ordering up rings and robes and a huge barbecue. And then the twist: son number one is angry at the injustice of it all and the outrageous permissiveness and graciousness of his father.

This is the part of the sermon where I'm supposed to berate son number one for his lack of grace, but it's not that simple a story. It is unclear what the younger son's motives are: whether his repentance is genuine or he is just pulling another con job on an old man that shows a high potential for being abused. Some of us have had to defend senior loved ones against ravenous family members and that is absolutely the right thing to do. I wouldn't be able to fault son number one for his reaction and I'm not sure Jesus faults him either. But Jesus does give us something to think about: we party when a lost sheep or coin is found; would we not all the more when a lost person is found? Whatever his motives for returning, at least he is alive and now safe with the potential to become even more than whatever he is in this moment.

Of course Jesus is contrasting the way the elder son holds on to his elevated status and power as the primary heir, to the father's wanton generosity and vision for what might be possible. Perhaps some of the people Jesus is spending time with aren't very trustworthy, or considerate, or clever, or reverent; but he sees them as if they were renewed already. He sees the possibility that they might yet let go of the security of their various enslavements and continue in fellowship with him.

Now it's time for us each of us to use our imaginations to answer this question: Which of our various enslavements and wanderings are we challenged to leave behind, to let go?

Permit me to offer a few ideas to add to yours:

I can no longer be impressed by the notion of being famous, nor even exceptionally popular. Since I was a youth it has been in my nature to be a pretty relational person and sometimes that has caused me to be too thin skinned, too eager to please, too concerned with my reputation, and occasionally too in need of attention. But in the last several years I've begun to feel a lot like the curmudgeonly king Solomon: "Vanity, vanity, it's all a vain charade." Probably it's a much keener awareness of the passing of finite time that's sapping me of patience with myself and others whenever fame is venerated. Did you know you can take a test to find out how much of a narcissist you are? Narcissism and sociopathic disorder have risen sharply in North America over the last 40 years. It's all Kanye Wests and Donald Trumps and selfie artists now. Maybe it wasn't such a great idea to tell our kids that no matter how little effort they made to be decent human beings they were inherently "special." Are we imprisoned by our own desperation about other people's approval and even adoration? Let go of that syrupy mana, there is real food in real relationships just ahead of you.

Do we need to be the smartest, most in demand, busiest people to feel worthy? Has the density of entries on your i-calendar become the measure of your value? Do you secretly take pride in how busy you are, or foolishly envy others because they get by on 4 or 5 hours of sleep. Do you suffer from FOMO - Fear Of Missing Out? Are we constantly on our phones in fear of missing an important IM or call? Is frenetic activity and constant social connection our drug of choice now. It might be time for a circumcision to cut that out of our psyches and make a commitment not to pass that neurosis on to the next generation.

Do we need to be released from some misplaced impulse to protect God from all the people that might harm his reputation and abuse the privilege of his association? Are we so tied up in protecting the church from any possible criticism that we risk harming the very people that God sent her church to take in and protect? Are we too cautious in defending the dignity of those of our friends who may be held in lower esteem by other of our friends? Do we need to loosen our protective grip on our own church so that we can unambiguously stand with all the people that God loved equally: the female ones, the black ones, the aboriginal ones, the old ones, the poor ones, the middle-aged white male ones, the immigrant ones, the mentally ill ones, the addicted ones, and our Gay, Lesbian, Bi, and Trans brothers and sisters? We need to be the ones ordering up rings and robes and barbecues to celebrate every person God welcomes home. It is time to let go of what we already are so that we can become what we might yet be.

Paul goes further than Lou Tzu. He says, anytime you look at someone who is in fellowship with Jesus you are already looking at a new person: everything is new, the old is gone. Let's make a commitment to do better at freeing ourselves from whatever is ensnaring us and anyone God is waiting for? Whatever we bind and get bound up in on earth, God allows that. And whatever we loosen up for ourselves and others here on earth, God counts as already free. Let's let go of the indignity of our former enslavement and accept the grace that God insists on offering, and let's extend it as deeply into ourselves and as far into the human family as our minds, hearts, and arms can possibly reach!