

Letting Go

Sermon for 21st Sunday after Pentecost (Oct. 14 2018), Mark 10:17-31

By Pastor Ingrid Chenoweth, Good Shepherd Front Royal.

I recently became a grandmother. Our little granddaughter is an absolute joy in our lives; she has brought so much love and laughter, and has given my husband and me the gift of being able to relive the early months of our children's lives. I wasn't sure I'd remember how to do all those baby care tasks; it had been nearly 20 years since I'd changed a diaper. But it all came back. And some things I dare to think I might do better than I did 20 years ago. Instead of lugging around an overfilled diaper bag, I just throw a couple of diapers and wipes and a ready-made bottle into my purse, and the baby and I are ready to travel.

But I still can't break the habit of trying to carry her car seat and five or six bags of groceries and whatever else, in from the car, on our return trips. I just *have* to see if I can bring everything in in one trip, maybe two, even though it'd be so much more sensible to just bring in a few items at a time. The last time I returned from the grocery store with the baby, I had her car seat handle over one arm, two bags in that hand, three bags in the other hand, and when I got to the door and fumbled with the door handle, it was just too much. A bag slipped through my fingers and crashed onto the tile floor of our front porch. And wouldn't you know it, it was the bag with the eggs. I watched as the yellow ooze spread along the inside of the white plastic bag. Definitely broken.

That moment was a teachable moment for me. I had stop and reflect on the importance of keeping my priorities in order. Holding on to too many things at one time made it impossible for me to open the door and enter. Mediation teacher Mark Nepo writes, "Time and time again, we are offered the chance to ... learn this: We cannot hold on to things *and* enter. We must put down what we carry, open the door, and then take up only what we need to bring inside." (Nepo, Mark: *The Book of Awakening*).

This is the lesson that Jesus wanted to teach the rich man who ran up to him asking about how to inherit eternal life. Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples were about to set out on a journey. They were carrying only what they needed for their long walk. As the man knelt before Jesus, Jesus could see that – internally - he was carrying a lot of baggage, cumbersome burdens he would have to let go of, before he could be able to make the journey of a disciple.

We don't know much about this eager would-be disciple, only that he was rich. Jesus could see that what he was clutching was making it difficult or impossible for him to move forward in his relationship with God. This rich man was standing at the doorway of new life, life with Christ, but he would have to put those burdens down before he could reach out to open the door.

What those burdens were, we can only speculate. Was it maintaining his social status as a rich man, well respected in society, that had become such a cumbersome burden? Was it the never-

ending responsibility of managing a large farm? Or the illusion of having control of his life and destiny? Was it an overly-cozy relationship with the Roman occupiers of Palestine - as was the case for tax collector Matthew – a relationship that provided him with wealth but compromised his relationship with his Jewish kin?

We don't know. What we do know is that when Jesus looked at him he saw the truth of his situation, and he loved him, and he told this man with honesty and compassion what it would take for him to live in the kingdom of God. He would have to put those burdens down. Sell all that he had, and in complete freedom come and follow him. This is the same challenge Jesus posed to St. Francis of Assisi, born Giovanni de Bernadone. The rich man turned away from Jesus, shocked and grieving, unwilling to let his possessions go. But Francis said yes, and allowed Jesus to fill his life and his soul with better things. The fruits of St. Francis' obedience still bless Christians today, eight centuries after his birth.

Jesus knows what it is that we clutch too tightly. Those burdens are different for each of us, but what they have in common is that they get in the way of a joyful and whole-hearted life of faith. Our burden may be fear of change. Or reluctance to let a bad relationship go. Or feeling that we're not good enough for God to love us. Or an unwillingness to let anyone, even God, have control in our lives.

But we know that Christ Jesus sees us, and loves us, and gently yet persistently invites us to lay those burdens down so that we may receive the new life that he wants to give us.

Catholic writer Henri Nowen compares this surrender to the kind of trust a trapeze artist has for his team member in whose hands he literally places his life. Nowen describes his wonder at watching an aerial act called the Flying Rodleights. He writes:

I will never forget how enraptured I became when I first saw the Rodleights move through the air, flying and catching as elegant as dancers.

The next day, I returned to the circus to see them again and introduced myself to them as one of their great fans. They invited me to attend their practice sessions, gave me free tickets, asked me to dinner, and suggested I travel with them for a week in the near future. I did, and we became good friends.

One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, 'As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.'

'How does it work?' I asked.

'The secret,' Rodleigh said, 'is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar.'

'You do nothing!' I said, surprised.

'Nothing,' Rodleigh repeated. 'The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.'

When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, the words of Jesus flashed through my mind: 'Father into your hands I commend my Spirit.' Dying is trusting in the catcher. To care for the dying is to say, 'Don't be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don't try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust.'

Not only is dying "trusting the catcher," but living is too. It can be painful to let go of what we clutch so tightly. But it's when we let go that can we receive the better things that Jesus has for us.

Amen.