

“Holding On, Letting Go”  
*For Bradley*

Luke 14:25-33

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When we first read this gospel text, it is easy to focus on the very last verse: “So therefore, none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.” We assume Jesus is concerned about all our wealth. But Jesus is concerned about anything that possesses us. He’s concerned about our being able to let go so that we can grasp hold of new life. Jesus is concerned about the spiritual problem of “letting go”.

Tis the season of “letting go.” My sister sent her firstborn off to college, Virginia Tech. I mailed my sister a book which Christina’s mother had given me when my firstborn left for college, titled *Letting Go*. But long before we send them to college, we send them off to preschool, then elementary, high school, and so on. September is the season of “letting go.”

*Holding on and letting go* is an age old theme. I remember a day in the early 70’s when I saw for the first time the movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*. I sat in a movie theatre in Dallas, Texas. Back then, I guess there were not so many movies, because it was a large theatre with a packed audience, and at the conclusion of the film there was a second of silence and then loud applause, something one doesn’t often hear at the theatre today.

*Fiddler on the Roof* is a movie about *holding on and letting go*--not of wealth but of tradition. A Russian Jewish father named Tevya comes face to face with tradition and he must decide whether to hold on or to let go of some of the traditions he holds dear. The movie tells the story of Tevya’s oldest daughter who refuses to wait for her father’s permission to marry, but would very much like his blessing. Though this goes against tradition, eventually Tevya lets go enough to accept the marriage. His second daughter chooses to marry a traveling teacher/professor/social activist who is sure to be in trouble and poor all his life. But she loves him. The father loosens his grip on tradition just enough to accept this marriage.

But his third daughter chooses to marry a Christian and this is something the Jewish father cannot accept. He says that if he lets go this much, he will break. And so he treats her as though she is dead. He seems determined to choose tradition over love for his daughter but at the very end of the movie, there’s a glimpse of a softened heart. As the family is forced to leave their village because they are Jewish, the third daughter comes to say goodbye. She and her husband are leaving also; they do not want to live where such things happen. And we hear Tevya’s faint whisper “God go with you”, and there’s the hint of a day when he will be able to let go of tradition enough to accept his youngest daughter’s interfaith marriage.

Our oldest daughter, Brittany, is in a relationship with a wonderful young man, Brad, whose religious background is Jewish. Now when she first told me about Brad, I remember wondering if this was a rejection of the Christian background which I’d taught her and that my whole professional life is devoted to. What about Christmas! What about tradition!

But then, like Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof*, I began to think. Jesus was a Jew; the very same things Jesus preached for and against to the Jewish people of his day, I preach for and against in our Christian communities today. *What does the Lord require of you--but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)*

To be clear--my life is guided by Jesus, his teachings and the power of his willingness to defeat the domination powers of his day and his faithfulness. I look to the spirit of his way to guide me as well as to the Hebrew scriptures that make up my Judeo Christian heritage. And yet, who am I to limit the ways and means that God chooses to reach out to God’s world?

And then, of course, there's Bradley whose relationship with my daughter brings out her best qualities. He cares for her and is considerate of her. He brings her joy and allows her to be her very best self, a self which is loving and caring, devoted to the good, with a keen sense for justice and mercy--all the qualities I hoped for her to possess as an adult. As parents, there's a time to hold on and a time to let go and the *letting go* is a spiritual life lesson.

Our traditions, even our religious traditions, (i.e. the rules we've always believed and the way things have always been done), can bind and possess us. And Jesus says, "none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions."

There's another thing that I find often possesses people and keeps us from the freedom to live: that thing is guilt. During our vacation I had a bad case of 24 hour guilt. I did something I wish I hadn't done. It made me keenly aware of the fact that I am not always the person I strive to be. Now, you probably want to say "Joyce, it surely wasn't very bad." But that's beside the point. Holding on to guilt often results in our withdrawing from the people we love the most and from the freedom to live life fully. My guilt sent me into a spiral of self absorption and emotional pain. I don't tell this story to solicit a pat on the back, but rather, because the Bible is filled with examples of this human condition we call "messing up." The Psalmist cries out for mercy and forgiveness. Guilt can possess us and Jesus calls us to "give it up!"

But I found it hard to "let go" and forgive myself. On our vacation we did a lot of day hikes. On this day, we were hiking in the beautiful and majestic coastal redwoods, the trail of the tall trees. We descended into a deep, quiet, beautiful forest. These trees were born before me and will live long after I'm gone. Yet, I, too, am part of the creation in which their beauty dwells. After some time in the quietness of this sanctuary of trees, we began the ascent. I still felt the emotional angst of guilt and wondered how I would "snap out of it."

In the midst of these ancient trees I remembered another ancient, the Jewish prophet Jeremiah, who lived perhaps during the time some of these very trees sprouted their first roots. Jeremiah had the overwhelming tasks of journeying with Israel from prosperity, to defeat, to exile in Babylon. In one of my favorite Bible verses, Jeremiah speaks a word of hope to a defeated, guilt-ridden people. He says: *For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.* (Jeremiah 29:11) Israel was not to remain immobilized and possessed by her guilt. Israel had a future with hope!

So as I climbed the steep ascent I pondered this verse, and with each deliberate step and each exhale of heavy breath, I "let go" a little more. And soon the deep forest gave way to greater and greater rays of sunlight and I was leaving behind my guilt and looking upward, outward, and forward to a future with hope.

Life is a constant process of holding on and letting go. And with each letting go brings the hope of possibilities. And Jesus says that to receive these new possibilities we must give up all that possesses us, whatever that may be, so that we may step into the light, into a future of hope. May this be so!