

The Federated Church of Hyannis ~ Reverend Derek L. White, Pastor

SERMON: Letting Go, Part 1

SCRIPTURE: Philippians 2:14-18

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Introduction:

Welcome to our First Sunday of Lent and a new series called “Letting Go”. Traditionally Lent is a season of fasting. As you will see the liturgical colors have changed to purple. The colors on the altar represent different seasons in the life of the church, and purple represents seasons of fasting. The only time other than Lent that purple is used is during Advent. That is because historically Advent was the fast leading up to the great feast on Christmas.

Our new Series on “Letting Go” has to do with the tradition of fasting. There are many ways to fast. There is fasting from sunrise to sunset. Several years ago, I did this type of fasting for 40 days. Each night after sunset I would break the fast with friends and we would have a big meal together. The food smelled and tasted so wonderful that every bite I took I couldn’t help but praise God. It was an incredible spiritual experience.

Another way to fast is to give up something we eat or drink for 40 days. Some people might give up alcohol or eat sweets for 40 days. And that is a form of fasting, it is part of choosing to make healthier decisions.

Another form of fasting is not eating anything for three days. This is the 72 hour fast. The benefit of this is that it helps to detoxify the body. Drinking lots of water is important with this kind of fast. I have done this kind of fasting and surprisingly it does feel good. There are many studies showing the health benefits of this kind of fasting.

There is also the fasting of giving up something, rather than giving up food. A lot of people try to quit smoking or swearing during Lent. This is the fasting of bad habits. It is a form of making a sacrificial offering of an indulgence to live a more holy life.

There are many ways to fast. Truth be told, this past year has felt almost like a yearlong fast in that we have given up so much. They say any change in habit for 40 days has long lasting effects. So after a year the changes we have experienced will have permanent effects. We have all learned to let go of so many things. But let me share the other side of fasting that is important.

PART 1: We Let Go to Pick Up

We let go so that we can pick up. Lent is much more than just giving something up. We let go so that we can pick up something new. The purpose of Lent is to be a journey. It is an experience so that we can gain something good from it.

Historically, when I have taught confirmation class, I always ask the students to write out what they plan to give up for Lent and what spiritual discipline they plan to take up. See, God doesn't want us to give up for nothing. We give up so we can take up.

We know the journey of Lent ultimately leads to the cross. It is because of what Christ gave up, that allows us to take up something new. We are no longer defined by the sins of our past, but we are transformed into the likeness of Christ. We let go of the transgressions of our past to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. We let go of the things that are not of God in order to receive the things that are of God.

God is far more interested in what we do than what we don't do. The apostle James says "faith without works is dead". It is not so much what we let go of that matters, it is what we can do when we let go of things we never should have held onto.

Part 2: Why Didn't I Let Go

Did you ever have an argument with someone that made you so mad that you just couldn't let it go? Did you ever have an opinion that you were so set on you just couldn't give it up? Did you ever want something so badly that you let it

get in the way of other important things in your life? Did you ever have someone really close to you say, “just let it go”?

Jesus tells the story of the wealthy young man who comes to him and asks him “teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life”? And Jesus’ response to him is to go and sell everything he has, and he will receive treasure stored up in heaven. We know at the end of the story the young man goes away sad because he had great wealth. He could not let go of it even though Jesus was offering him something better.

Perhaps some of you are facing a similar challenge. With all this time at home you are going through closets and basements cleaning out things. And you are wrestling with the choice of letting things go. Had it been let go of years ago there might have been room for something new. Jesus called the disciples to leave everything behind in order to follow him. Fishermen left their nets, which if we know anything about fishermen, they never abandoned good gear. They were willing to let it go to follow the path God had called them to.

Part 3: Don’t Hold on to That which Holds You Back

A big part of the journey of faith is learning to let go of the things that hold us back from doing the things God calls us to. Not too long ago I was talking with a friend who is in ministry. For years he had a very successful job, but he was miserable. In his early 50s he decided to go to seminary. His wife encouraged him to quit his job and pursue his calling. He left that career behind and fell in love doing good work every day serving in ministry.

I would say what he did was a leap of faith. Not everyone is called to go to seminary and enter into a called ministry like my friend was. But I am sure we have all felt the challenge of feeling like something was holding us back. Jesus came to offer life abundant. But in order to receive it, it first requires letting go of the things that rob us of joy in life.

Part 4: Paul’s Letter to Phillipis

That is what Paul’s letter this morning as our text reflects. He says don’t grumble or argue but be like shining stars. He speaks of being poured out like a drink offering. Paul is speaking about all that he gave up to go and plant churches and serve as a missionary. He let everything go to follow Christ.

Now we know from the book of Acts that Paul was once Saul. He was angry and bitter. He hunted down the early Christians, speaking murderous things against them. But on the road to Damascus, he encountered the risen Lord and was transformed. He lost his sight, he lost his way, he lost his convictions that drove him to persecute the early church. But God gave him new sight, and a new way, and new convictions to follow that grew the church. Paul's conversion is one of the greatest examples of letting go. Throughout all of Paul's letters he conveys why he did it. What he found in Christ far exceeded what he gave up.

Conclusion:

Lent is not about just giving something up; it is about discovering something new. So before making any plans of what you plan to give up for Lent, think about what you hope to gain.

Here are a couple of suggestions to think about. Consider giving up 5 minutes a day of being on a computer or screen to read a Psalm in the Bible. Consider giving up 30 seconds at dinner to say grace for a meal. Consider giving up sharing negative memes on social media to write a card of encouragement to a friend. Consider praying for peace rather than holding onto bitterness.

When we let go, we make room to receive something new. So throughout the next forty days of Lent, consider what is worth letting go of in order to receive something better from God. Amen.