

“Letting Go”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
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“Wailing Wall” an essay by Anne Lamott from the collection *Grace (Eventually)*

There was so much bad news this winter that many of us were left feeling pummeled and disturbed. ... What can you say when people call with a scary or heartbreaking prognosis? You say that we don't have to live alone with our worries and losses. You say that it totally sucks, and that grace abounds. You can't say that things will be fine down the road, because that holds the spiritual authority of someone chirping ... “It's all good!” ... It's so not all good and I'm worried sick.

One intensely green spring morning, I prepared to teach children at my church about the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. I had been assigned to teach the youngest children, who have the attention span of squirrel monkeys, but at least I had good curriculum materials...

I'd been pumped up about the lesson ..., when I saw an art project suggested in the curriculum materials that involved building a paper Wailing Wall with students, to teach them about pouring one's heart out to God and about letting go. I'd printed images from the Internet of a young boy and his father ... pushing prayers written on paper into cracks in the wall. This is something I do all the time, shove bits of paper with prayers and names on them into desk drawers, little boxes, my glove compartment. I've found that when you give up on using your mind to solve a problem – which your mind is holding on to like a dog with a chew toy - writing it down helps turn off the terrible alertness. When you're not siphoned into the black hole of worried control and playing fretful Savior, turning the problem over to God or the elves in the glove compartment harnesses something in the universe that is bigger than you, and that just might work.

...

The kids listened pretty well, except for Frederick, who moved sneakily around the room like an incompetent spy. I guided him back to his mother's lap. I wanted to whisper something to him that I'd seen on a bumper sticker that week: that only one six-billionth of this was about him. But the lesson was about Letting Go: so I gritted my teeth winsomely.

“What does letting go mean?” I asked. ... They looked around at one another, worried as cats. ...

“See, sometimes, if you’re lucky, you get to a point where you’re sick of a problem, or worn down by tinkering with it, or clutching it. And letting it go, maybe writing it down and sending it away, buys you some time and space, so maybe freedom and humor sneak in – which is probably what you were praying for all along.”

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A story to start.

My daughter Lillian is three years old when she becomes part of our family. She speaks Mandarin. Kate and I do not and so our communication consists of broad gestures that resemble that of benevolent circus clowns. Not too many months in I am in the kitchen on a stepladder reaching just beyond my reach for a champagne flute. It is a precarious effort that comes to no good end. The crystal flute shatters on the kitchen floor below.

I’m a new mother. My best friend died just three weeks after our return home from China, the same best friend who had given me the now shattered champagne flute lying in shards as I stand aloft taking it all in: my life.

I am overwhelmed and weeping and still standing on the stepladder when I hear a little girl voice say in perfect English, “Let it go, Momma.”

Would I ever let go of my friend, now gone? No. The grief would remain forevermore. But in that moment, I return to the land of the living. I step down off of the stepladder and I do what must be done. Tenderly, I gather up the exquisitely beautiful and now shattered glass and I let it go.

And I marvel that it was my daughter’s mysterious yet clear voice that brought me back.

Let it go, Momma.

How does the preacher prepare a sermon on letting go in the wake of the week that just passed when we witnessed the passing of a cruel tax bill that is essentially a Trojan Horse; when we witnessed more women – and some men - coming forward with stories of sexual harassment and abuse;

when a North Korean missile launch pours yet more lighter fluid on an already too hot fire.

I'll stop there but you know that the list doesn't end there. And that's just this past week. The question is begged: how does the preacher prepare a sermon on letting go in the wake of the last 10 months?

How do we consider letting go when democracy is holding on for dear life? When we are ourselves holding on for dear life? And holding on singing the old lyric that declares that, "We shall not be moved"?

I tattooed the word "Resist" onto my arm not "Let it go."

And I am mindful of the dreamy psychological wisdom of Carl Jung who said, "What you resist persists."

Many in this sanctuary are mindful of the clear still voice of the Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron who said, "Resistance to unwanted circumstances has the power to keep those circumstances alive and well for a very long time."

And mindful of the wisdom of an insightful activist and writer (whose name I cannot remember) who said that really those who are in the deepest thrall of resistance are those who cannot accept that the progressive values that bring to the center people who have historically lived at the margins, they cannot accept the values that uphold a social contract to care for the most vulnerable among us. Those who cannot accept not only these values but also the fact that much has changed precisely because a critical mass of Americans do hold these values. That's where the root resistance lies.

So this is how we consider letting go in these fraught times: letting go as a micro consideration.

On the macro level, we're calling our Senators and Representatives. We're signing petitions. On the macro level we're accompanying immigrants to their ICE check-ins. We're organizing marches. We're writing letters to the editor. We're knitting pussy hats and wearing them proudly. We're writing postcards. We're wringing our hands and gnashing our teeth. We're weeping and incredulous and righteously angry and fiercely committing ourselves to the cause that is resistance. In bell hook's words: True resistance begins with people confronting pain ...

and doing something to change it." Any justice movement worth their weight is all about confronting pain and doing something to change it and hanging in for the long haul. We will not let go. We will not let go of the vision of a more perfect union. Indeed, we will not be moved.

However.

However, there is the micro level and on the micro level letting go is an essential spiritual practice if we are to sustain ourselves through this national storm *and through our own personal storms*. True: only one six-billionth of this ("this" being life) is about each of us but that's actually the fraction of life over which we have some control. One six-billionth - and even that much may be an exaggeration.

On the micro level is where you pick up a Pema Chodron book and dig in. On the micro level is where you put down the devastation of the day whether you are lamenting the passage of a brutal tax bill or a brutal argument with your sibling, you put it all down and put on your walking shoes. The micro level is where you look up and out and pay attention to the small details that together make beauty.

That's what Anne Lamott reminds us of: that none of us are alone and that grace abounds. That when we are able to open our tight-fisted hold on the challenges that are dogging us we move closer to free. That time out for a walk or to read a book or watch a movie or bake a pie or sing "Let It Go" at church one Sunday morning – maybe that takes you a few steps away from despair.

Or maybe you write it down or say it out loud and maybe when you come back to it later there's suddenly space for your easy breath ... for your soul to expand. Maybe there's suddenly room for answers to emerge ... or for the admission that the answer is not what's needed. Maybe, as Lamott concludes, freedom and humor is what you were praying for / looking for all the while.

The song says, "It's funny how some distance / Makes everything seem small / And the fears that once controlled me / Can't get to me at all ..."

Let it go ...

And as this Sunday is the first of the Advent season, just a word on letting go at this time of year in particular.

The Christmas story begins with the Annunciation when the angel says to Mary, "Be not afraid." These are the words we must live by, Beloveds. Be not afraid. Rest in the mystery of this season – a season of waiting, of digging deeper, of heading toward the longest night rich in the knowing that the earth will keep turning and sun will continue to rise. That's all the season need be for each of us: sacred time. "May you have an adequate Christmas", said a wise friend. (Reverend Jake Morill)

May you let go of what every commercial you've ever seen tells you what Christmas is supposed to be.

All Christmas is *supposed* to be a good for your Soul. Advent reminds us to be not afraid. To rest in patience and grace trusting that at least here in this sanctuary there are people beside you. We are reminded to listen to the wisdom of the youngest among us, our children who by holy innocence bring us back to the land of the living:

Let it go, Momma.

Let it go, Dear Souls.

Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0MK7qz13bU> ---
sing along "Let It Go"

