

“The spirituality of letting go”

- One of the hardest things we, as people of faith, are called to do is to let go and let God
 - If you remember back a few weeks, we talked about blind Bartimaeus, and before that the rich young man
 - In each of these encounters in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks them to let go of something
 - The rich man could not, because, as the translation said, “he was holding onto many things and was not about to let go.”
 - The beggar, however, was holding on to an old worn-out, probably tattered, cloak
 - And he tossed it aside, everything he owned and valued, the item that was key to keeping warm and surviving, and modest
 - He still tossed it aside and stood before Jesus naked and seen
 - You and I are asked the same, and surely fall somewhere on a spectrum between these two men
 - Having been given much, and having given a lot away over our lifetimes, yet still holding on to some things
 - And still we must always look in our hearts and see what it is that we are holding onto
 - What it is that Jesus might be calling us to let go of in order to be more of what God created us to be.
 - It really is the opposite of the message that we get everywhere else in the world, isn't it?
 - In the letting go, we receive
 - The last shall be first
 - In the dying we live
 - And blessed are the meek, and the grieving
 - The good news is a counter balance I think to the message of acquiring more at any cost
 - This spirituality of letting go applies to so many aspects of our spiritual lives, and perhaps can apply to tonight in particular
 - Because the service tonight is designed to be a sort of funeral for everyone and anyone we have lost

- It is made to be that place where we must wrestle with having to let go of some of the most precious things that we have in life
- And that is those whom we have loved. Who have loved us, guided us, helped form us into the people we are
- And who have died and gone on to be with the Lord
- This service, and the funerals that we have when someone dies, is all about letting them go and letting God
- Or in particular, giving someone over to God- trusting God with someone we love but can see no longer
- I remember back in seminary when we were studying liturgy and learning the ins and outs of our prayer book
 - And the ancient traditions that go into every single word in there
 - One of my professors was talking through the burial service, and mentioned an old tradition that I try to include every time
 - If we have planned a service together, you will likely remember me encouraging the family members to walk with the loved one in procession
 - Whether we are carrying ashes, or walking behind a casket carried by pall bearers, the family and I enter into the church with the deceased
 - I try my hardest to have the family process in along with us in the beginning of the service
 - I remember the powerful moment in seminary when my professor explained that this liturgical action
 - She said: It is a great act of faith illustrated in this liturgical movement
 - That the family and the priest bring a person who has died and place them before God at the altar
 - And then the family lets go and goes to their seats.
 - They bring their loved one to God, and then turn over to God the one whom they are missing more than anything in the world right at that moment
 - And at that altar, they symbolically leave them in God's hands
 - In that moment, the liturgy's job is to facilitate that beginning of the grief process and healing journey
 - After this moment in the opening procession, the priest then shepherds the loved one on from there
 - From the church, to the car, to the graveside, and finally into God's eternal love and rest
 - "We commend to Almighty God our love one" as the concluding committal graveside service says

- Letting go, in this most intense moment, and really in any part of our lives, is a huge act of faith, isn't it?
- We have to believe that when we let go of something or someone, that God will be there to receive that
- That God will care for them and love them as we have and better
- And that God will take care of us and we will be OK without them
- And that for Christians who stand at the grave, to let go in the hope and faith that what we see is not all that there is
- This spiritual practice of letting go is one that needs a lifetime of practice
 - Because it is over our entire lifetime that we are asked to let go of things
- You know, back when I was first ordained a priest, I was 29 years old
- I knew all of this, at least it was all up here in my head, all theoretical
- Because as I look back, at 29 years old I had not been asked to give up a whole lot yet
- I had not had to stand at a grave and say goodbye to someone
- But over the past decade, this spiritual practice of giving loved ones over to God has really been made real
- It has become a practice of my heart now, not just in my mind
- It does not mean that I don't love them still, or that I have forgotten them
 - No no, giving someone to God deep act of love.
 - It is not forgetting, ignoring, or compartmentalizing in unhealthy ways
 - Indeed, I still feel the grief and shed some tears, and long to see those I have lost
 - Just as I am sure you do
- But in those moments, I remember something my spiritual director told me: he said that when we lose someone, our own Cloud of Witnesses grows
- You know that passage from Hebrews? The Great Cloud of Witnesses that cheer us on as we run the race?
- I now know a few of them personally. It has changed from the vague cloud of people I don't know, to faces and voices that I love
- And they are there cheering me on
- And when those moments come, the moments of death, and the moments of overwhelming grief
- I focus on my spiritual practice of loving and letting go with God, turning them over to God to care for

- And welcoming them into my own cloud of witnesses who are still loving me and caring for me just as much as they did when they lived.
- And I also know that the day will come when others will have to give me to God, to entrust God with my soul
 - That day will come when I must finally and completely let go of this life I have lived and built
 - We will each complete the spiritual discipline of letting go:
 - Of everything we have earned, acquired, created, nurtured, loved- in time our day will too come when we breathe no more
 - And we give everything we are back to God who created us
 - I believe that a lifetime of practicing letting go helps prepares us for that, if we allow it
 - It builds up our faith muscle so that when life is ending, we can trust that God will be there for us too
 - Just as he has been for others
 - Mark McIntosh “I love my family, but I’m ready to go.”
- I know that evenings like this are often tough, and funerals of our loved ones are terribly difficult
 - And in the days and years following there are ups, and downs, and repeated opportunities for us to love and miss them
 - And also repeated opportunities for us to entrust them to the God who created and loved them even more than we could
 - And is doing so now
 - Yes, there is finally good news in the letting go
 - Because when we let go, God is faithful to be there to catch us and those we love
 - This is our good news tonight: right there in 1 Thessalonians... “encourage one another with these words”
 - That Jesus’s on death and resurrection was the new pattern God was setting that each of us will experience
 - And that our death, our final letting go, will only lead us on to glory
 - And it is then that we will be reunited with all of those saints who have gone on before
 - We will find that God was faithful, and our trusting God with those we love was not ill-fated
 - Death has lost its sting, its finality.
 - And love really does overcome all.

Alleluia, Alleluia, and Amen.