

Sermon Text For August 28, 2016

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Matthew 19:16-22, Genesis 43:1-15

“Let it go”

So, that’s the week in which we find ourselves. We are letting our children go. For some of us it isn’t that big of a deal, they’ve been in high school but for some of us only 2 kid left at home. For others the beginning of kindergarten that marks 12 more years of school ahead of them. For others we are letting the kids go in marriage, away from the family, into another family that takes priority over the one that they’ve known up to now.

In every transition in life it requires a certain amount of letting go from what was and the familiar to what is and the unfamiliar, even the threatening. It requires a certain amount of letting go of our fear and anxiety as we embark on a new normal and let go of the old.

Our Joseph story today doesn’t actually involve Joseph directly. We find a father, Jacob who is consistently called by his new name, Israel. You remember him, the wrestler who is given a new name. Today he has to let go of his beloved son, Benjamin. When I was flying back from Italy last month after doing a wedding on the Adriatic coast, I like how that sounds, there was a commotion in front of me diagonally across the plane. A woman was pleading with the flight attendant to allow her to stay in an aisle seat, which was not hers, so that her two sons wouldn’t have to fly without her. So I looked around for these two children and all I could find were two grown men, in their mid twenties who looked perfectly well adjusted. She kept her aisle seat which wasn’t hers because of the fuss she put up. In this story that we are reading today, Benjamin is in his 30s, but he remains the beloved son and one not easily let go.

Today, as we look at this Scripture we find, especially matched with the first Scripture, that when we talk about letting go it isn’t just about children, it can be about money, power, or anything that we struggle to let go, which jeopardizes this eternal life which has been gifted to us by Jesus. Let’s read.

Letting go has so many different facets. For many of us it is a reminder of a queen who was cast off and who indignantly said that the cold never bothered her anyway. But in that’s not what we are talking about today. In our first Scripture Jesus and a young man are involved in a great conversation about letting go. Jesus, what do I have to let go in order to obtain eternal life? Jesus responds, you think you have what it takes? The man answers, try me. Okay: Don’t murder. CHECK, don’t commit adultery, CHECK, Don’t steal, CHECK, don’t bear false witness

or lie, CHECK, honor your father and your mother, CHECK, love your neighbor as yourself, CHECK.

I'm doing pretty good, aren't I Jesus? Give me something a little more challenging, that was easy. Each one of us in this room could probably check off all of those things on that list. If that's all it takes to earn eternal life, we are good, no problem. We know what is right or wrong. Jesus then goes on, okay, you want to be perfect? Sure, yeah, okay, lay it on me. Let all of your possessions go, just let them go. Sell them all and give the proceeds to the poor. You know what Jesus, I'm okay not being perfect. I'm good where I am now. I don't have to let it all go, just those easy things. It is easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to let his riches go.

So, just to be clear, this is not a stewardship sermon, but that would make a great segue, and yes we are still in Genesis, but today we are called to let go that which interferes with our relationship with our Savior. At what point do we stop and say you know what, I will follow you up to that point, but when you ask me to let go of my child, my money, my wife, my obsession with __ you fill in the blank, that is where I stop and don't let go and recognize that less than perfect is okay with me.

Jacob could not and would not let Benjamin go even if it meant that his family would starve. Are you still with me on this journey through Genesis and specifically now in this Joseph story? At the end of chapter 42 we have the brothers returning home from Egypt with a lot of grain but one less brother, Simeon, who was kept as a prisoner in Egypt until the brothers returned. Joseph had said you cannot return unless you bring Benjamin back and I'm keeping Simeon until you bring him back.

I want you to notice that poor Simeon is never really mentioned, it all becomes about Benjamin. No one seems to remember that Simeon is in prison and back then surviving in prison was no small feat. Any day your life could be compromised.

Reuben at the end of 42 insists that they go back and take Benjamin and he tells his father his two sons would serve as insurance if he didn't come back with Benjamin. His own kids. But Jacob says no, Benjamin is not going to leave my home. I've already lost Joseph, the son of my beloved Rachel, but I will not lose Benjamin, the last one from her.

And so we pick up in 43 and the first two verses remind us that things are going from bad to worse. They are in the middle of the 7 years of famine and it is severe, and they had eaten up all of the grain that they had. Jacob again tells his sons to get off their donkeys and go buy more grain. But we have a problem. They can't.

In comes Judah. Remember Judah? No, you probably don't. He appeared at the beginning of the Joseph story. When Joseph was 17 his brother took him and threw him into a pit and they were about to kill him. Reuben, who offered his sons, was trying to get Joseph out, but Judah says, lets make a profit off of him and sell him into slavery to people who are going to Egypt. Judah was directly responsible as the decision maker who got Joseph sold into slavery into Egypt. He's at it again.

Dad, I will not go to Egypt unless you let me take Benjamin with me. That mean man in Egypt said we cannot have grain unless we take him back with us. He accused us of being spies and terrorists and the only way that we could prove that we are innocent is if we take Benjamin. He will not give us food if we don't bring Benjamin. It is that simple.

We think we have Judah figured out. He doesn't care about Benjamin just like he didn't care about Joseph. He just wants to find a way to get food on his family's table, his own direct family. The only way to do that is to take Benjamin back to Egypt. But something changes in vs.9, we have to see him in a different light. Out of the blue Jacob says, and he didn't have to say this, he could have just said we are taking Benjamin and that is that, but he says: "I will be surety for the boy." Surety in Hebrew means an offering of like for like. It is an agreement of exchange one for another. Judah was saying I am willing to let my life go in order to protect my brother. He says: "If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever." I will sacrifice my life in order to save his.

What a transformation. Judah crosses a threshold where here he is able to let go of his life in order to ensure that his family, and his little brother, will survive. I will be surety for him. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life...

This resonates with Jacob, he hears his son and he is able to let him go. A couple months ago I was searching the internet for a former ambassador to Egypt. Her brother was a member of our church in Russia, and I needed some information. As I searched for her, I ran across an obituary from a year ago of a 14 year old boy who had tragically died by falling out of a window at his home in Madrid. To my horror I realized this was Jonathan, the son of this friend of mine who served as clerk of session when I was in Russia. He was the same age of Bethany and for 5 years we had gone to their house to celebrate his birthday, and he was no more.

I called my friend in Madrid, shocked and when we talked I was surprised by his approach. A year had passed since he had said goodbye and almost as Jacob says if I am bereaved, I am bereaved. He missed his son terribly, but somehow, someway, he had let him go to God His creator, and he was at peace.

When we read in vs.14, I'm not sure if I'm seeing a father at peace to let his son go, but I think I am. Remember this is a man who had let his son go and stray too far away from him once already only to never see him again. But he sends Benjamin off by appealing to El Shaddai, the God of power. Only he can intervene. The only way we can let something go which is precious to us, permanently, is to lay it at the feet of El Shaddai. He does let Benjamin go in the midst of a Garden of Gethsemane prayer where he says in essence not my will be done, but yours. It is in this context where we see a fine line between hope and cynical fatalism. When he says if I am to be bereaved, then so be it, I hear that as coming from someone who appealed to El Shaddai, the God of power. Not someone who cynically had given up hope thinking it just doesn't matter anyway.

Let me encourage you to let go of whatever is holding you back from the Lord. Let it go because it does matter and our hope is built on the God of power who wants us to live eternally with him. The more we place limitations on what we let go for Jesus' sake, the more we limit what God can do in our own lives. Amen.