



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 10, 2013
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

The Paradox of Our Faith: Letting Go and Holding On II Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Billy Bob was walking through the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina on his way to visit his sweetheart Daisy Mae and he was thinking more about the supper she had planned instead of where he was walking. All of a sudden he slipped and slid over the edge of the cliff beside his mountain path. About 20 feet down and with several hundred more feet to go, he frantically grabbed onto a bush that moved but held for the moment.

There he was, hanging by a bush above certain death and his hands began to perspire and tire almost immediately. "Is anyone up there?" he hollered.

"I'm here, Billy Bob," came a deep voice from above.

"Who's there? Can you help me?" the young man yelled back.

The voice answered, "It's the Lord, Billy Bob. Let go and I will save you."

Billy Bob looked down and he looked up. He looked at his slipping hands and he looked down again. He looked up again. Finally he yelled back up the side of the cliff, "Is anyone else up there?"

Sometimes life boils down to the simple matter of letting go or holding on. And sometimes it does not seem like much of a choice at all as in the case of poor Billy Bob hanging off the mountain being told to let go when what he really wants is something more substantial to hold onto. As we discover in the parable we just read, biblically the understanding is that in order to let go, we have to hang on—another paradox in our life of faith.

This familiar parable is a wonderful example of this paradox. Depending on how you look at the parable, and perhaps how you find yourself in the story, you may call it the Parable of the Prodigal, the Waiting Father, or the

Older Sibling. However you understand this famous parable, it is a story of letting go and holding on.

The Younger Son, or the Prodigal, was the first to let go. Whether young or older, we either know or remember that feeling of needing to get away, to discover what life waits beyond the edge of our yard, or to discover something, anything that is different from life as it is now. Maybe he was the adventurous type. Maybe he was tired of being under the thumb of an insufferable older brother. Maybe he had heard stories about the distant country and wanted to see for himself if they were true. Whatever his story, he was hanging on by a thread and was ready to let go.

Let go, he did. The young man was willing to let go of a lot. He released his grip on tradition, family, and security in order to go off and find his way in the world. Along the way he let go of his morals as he wasted what little inheritance he received on what the Bible kindly refers to as “dissolute living. Penniless, homeless, and hungry, he had to let go of his self-respect, especially as a Jew, and hire himself out to work worked on a hog farm in order to survive. Finally, he had to let go of his pride in order to return home and ask his father for a job as a hired hand. This young man let go of a lot.

At the same time, his father was forced to release his youngest son and allow him to wander the world without his protection. Parents well understand the difficulty of letting go of our children so that they can grow into their own personalities and lives, but it is difficult work under the best of situations. The father very generously granted his young son’s request to “find himself.” Obviously the father also had to let go of some of his property and money in order to fund his child’s exploration of life. He had to let go of tradition in which it was the firstborn son who inherited everything from the father. And when things did not go well, he had to let go of his pride when it came to the probable reaction of his friends. When the boy finally returned, the father had to let go of his disappointment, his fear, his anger, and his hurt in order to welcome his beloved son home. The father let go of a lot.

Then there is the older son who had to let go of a few things as well. First, he had to let go of a portion of his inheritance as the firstborn son. His father broke with convention and gave the younger son a portion of the estate which should have belonged to the older son. Any child with a vagabond sibling knows the resentment that builds when the free-spirited one leaves everyone else behind to take care of business and still shares in the inheritance. Beyond watching some of his inheritance walk away, however,

I doubt he had much trouble letting go of his little brother when he left. He was probably relieved to see him go, except for the fact that now all of the work would fall to him. Based on his reaction when his brother returned, however, the older brother was still holding in to his anger and resentment. We understand that kind of grip, too, don't we?

What makes this story such a popular one is that it is so familiar. Whether in terms of family experiences, business or social relationships, or global dynamics, we know or live as one or another of the characters in this story. We also know what it is like to have to let go of something, believing all the while that doing so will mean that someone or something will have to catch us when things go wrong. In order to let go, you also have to hold on.

Each one of these men held onto some precious things. The father held onto his love for his son, his concern for his welfare, the strength that helped him make it through each day, and the unflinching hope that he would return home.

Despite all that he had done, the Prodigal held onto his father's love, the security his family provided, and the hope that he would be welcomed home despite his selfish choices and immoral life. The older son held tightly to his loyalty to his father, but he also held onto his pride, his anger, his resentment, and his personal hurt. He had massaged these feelings over the years and they prevented him from being happy that his younger brother was home safe and sound.

Each one of these men understood the feeling of holding onto all that was dear in life and being asked to let go when no safety net was to be seen. If the father let go, he could lose his younger son forever. If the Prodigal let go, he could literally lose his life. If the older brother let go, this irresponsible kid might come back home and try to take not only the rest of the inheritance but the father's affection as well. Better than anyone, perhaps, he understood what it feels like to hold onto life by the fingertips with no help coming other than a voice in the air.

But there is that voice, that deep voice of God urging each of them to let go and trust that God will catch them. It is not just any voice, however. It is the voice of God. And it is not merely sound in the air, it is the reassurance of God's presence backed up by a long history of God's grace with his people. It is the voice of the Father calling for a party to celebrate the return of a lost

child and the voice of the Father assuring the faithful child that he will inherit all that is promised. It is the voice of grace letting go of all that is wrong and harmful in life and holding onto all that is good and life-giving.

All three of these men understood why they were holding on and why they needed to let go. Regardless of what we do in life, we constantly have to let go and hold on. The two responses really do go together—at least in terms of our faith. So often there is pride or a negative attitude we need to get rid of. We have to let go of harmful ways of living. We have to let go of our sin. Only then can we hold on tightly to those things that matter most to us—our self understanding and our hope. Ultimately, of course, letting go of negative things allows us greater ability to hold onto what really matters which is God. As we are hitting the eject button on the negative things in our lives, God is holding fast to us for God never lets us go. As George Matheson's great hymn affirms:

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.¹

Whatever it is in life that is holding us up from getting on with life as God intends, we have to trust the voice that has called to us through the ages, "Let go and I will save you." Jesus discovered this truth on the cross. God never lets go of us. God never stops looking for us and hoping for us that we will finally become all that he created us to be.

The Apostle Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth about the great transformation faith brings about in our lives. "So if anyone is in Christ," he said, "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (II Corinthians 5:17). No matter who we are, what we have done, or what we have neglected to do, when we trust God to catch us, we can let go of our old life and land safely in the life God desires for us. We are prodigals, we are older brothers and sisters, we are parents worried about our children, we are wanderers seeking the path, we are lost souls clinging to the last thing we think will keep us from falling. If we are not careful, however, those things may keep us from falling into the loving arms of God. Let go . . . and hold onto God. Amen.

¹George Matheson, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go," *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995): 540.

March 10, 2013

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In this season when our spiritual focus is turned inward, O God, we become uneasy with the realization that you know us completely. You are our Creator who discerns our thoughts and the deepest longings of our hearts. You number the hairs upon our heads and often meet our needs before we are even aware of them. You share our joys and know the dark places of our lives that we would rather hide from you. We are grateful, O God, that you comprehend all that we do and all that we are, and yet, you do not give us what we deserve but share with us out of the abundance of your blessings.

You know our hearts, and even still, you bestow compassion instead of condemnation. For every good and perfect gift which comes from you, we offer our thanks and praise.

Merciful God, even as we acknowledge the length and height and breadth and depth of your mercy toward us, we recognize that we are all too quick to condemn others. You have been generous to us so that we might share your blessings, but instead, we blame those in need for their plight or remain complacent in response to their pain. You have given us your words of comfort and assurance, and yet, we so often have only harsh words for one another. You have extended your strong arm to support us and your generous hand to sustain us, but too often, we can only point fingers in accusation or throw our hands up in defeat. You have showered your grace on us extravagantly and shown us your mercy time after time, yet we continually reopen old wounds, hold onto grudges, and fail to recognize the new creation emerging in others. Teach us to reach out in compassion to those who are hurting, to accept one another's flaws as well as strengths, to offer words of hope and healing. Give us the wisdom to discern your will for our lives and the humility not to presume to know your will for others. Grant to us a clear vision of your call and empower us for the task, we pray. Teach us to build bridges that unite and to tear down walls that divide, that, by the power of your Spirit, we might accomplish your work in our world. In the strong and compassionate name of Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
Associate Minister