

Letting Go

Luke 20:27-38

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 10) 2019

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What's your story?

What narrative tells you who you are and why you're the way you are? What story tells us who we are as a nation? As a society? As a state or region? What stories interpret our worlds for us?

One way or another we live by stories. In your family of origin, most likely you were given a role in your family story. I was the oldest child and became the perceived peacemaker in a family that had much conflict. Bob Choate shared with me, and I share with you with his permission, that he was given the role of hero. He was the family member who was perceived to come in and rescue, bail out, help, save, become a success, and so on. Some of you were perceived as the family scapegoat, or the caretaker, or enabler, or ... In your story you were labeled the wild one, the brainiac, the athletic one... You were "fatty" or "klutz" or "the one who lives with their head in books." Of course, our roles in our dysfunctional family stories often become self-fulfilling prophecies. We end up living them out.

The same is true for our national and social stories, and how we interpret history? Which stories tell us who we are? For example, was it the Civil War or the War Between the States? The term "War Between the States" is a Southern interpretation, which says it was a war between individual states and not a

rebellion within the *United States*. And it is a way to say the Civil War was about states rights and not about slavery.

We all live by stories and they tell us how to see the world and who we are in it. They may be true stories or they may be false stories: true stories make us better, truer people where false stories/myths form us into false people, dysfunctional people, and warped people. Stories are about life and death: stories that give and sustain life or they can be deathly stories that dehumanize, diminish, and destroy people. Our stories are important.

In our Gospel reading from today, Luke gives us a story about the Sadducees debating Jesus and much of what is going on is a result of two different stories being in conflict. The Sadducees, who didn't believe in resurrection, are trying to corner Jesus with questions about the resurrection. But the answer Jesus gives does not make sense to them. They don't get what Jesus is talking about, and they don't really want to get it. They just want to debate him and try to show him up in front of the people. Jesus is speaking of another world. He is telling another story.

The Sadducees were looking for a fight when they asked a strange question based upon some obscure knowledge of the law, and Jesus responded with an involved answer. "Get out of your old-world way of thinking. The resurrection is a new way in a new world. Unjust social arrangements—in which women have no hope, no standing and no safety net unless they are married—will pass away. You're asking the wrong questions. The age to come will be a whole new way of life that you cannot even begin to comprehend."

The Sadducees were trying to debate Jesus on the resurrection but were using old categories; old perspectives that Jesus knew did not fit with a resurrection way of living and thinking. Jesus is challenging them to think differently, to imagine differently, and to see the world differently. He is giving them a different story and challenging them to let go of their old story.

Years ago a Major League pitcher was asked what he thought about his future prospects. He answered, “The future is like the present, only longer.” Like that pitcher and like the Sadducees, to receive God’s way in Christ we have to get away from thinking that the resurrection is like the present only longer. We are called to enter a whole new world, a new way. Hear a new story. When Jesus speaks of the resurrection, he is giving us a glimpse of God’s new world. It is something beyond our present experience, something that we can know only through hope, through faith in the living God, and then practicing that resurrection hope by our daily living and daily walk with this living God.

Resurrection is about what the Apostle Paul calls the “new creation” (II Cor. 5:17). Old creation will not fit into new creation. Or to use a different metaphor, this one from Jesus, you cannot put new wine in old wineskins. The old wineskins will not contain the new wine but the new wine will end up bursting the old wineskins (Luke 5:33-39).

Our challenge is, are we willing to give up our old wineskins? Can we let go of our old story, the story that has sustained us, the story that is familiar to us, is comfortable, and perhaps with which we have a certain amount of control? Can we let go?

Following Christ is ongoing training in learning to let go. We let go so we can grasp a new story. Better – so we can be grasped by a better story – the resurrection story of the new creation is the beginning of God’s new story.

Part of letting go has to do with giving up control. We can’t force things to come out the way we think they should. For example, our impatience in trusting Christ shows up in our always trying to take matters into our own hands. We try to force things in our personal lives just like we do in our national lives. Violence, guns and war are all about trying to control outcomes and are the end result of impatience.

But following Jesus Christ is about letting go, living out of control. Partly, in learning to give up control, we discover that in following Jesus into the New Creation, our eyes are opened to how much we’ve all been controlled by the powers of death and diminishment, sin and dehumanization. We learn that our old way of living and seeing not only has diminished others but has diminished us, as well. As we let go and live into the new story of the resurrection, we discover how much more God has for us and for others.

I remember when I was about four or five clinging to the side of the swimming pool. The water from the pool cooled the hot concrete and I could hold on without burning my hands and arms. Out in the deep water of the pool my dad was treading water, beckoning me to come on, let go of the side of the pool and launch out into the deep. Do what I had been trained to do – paddle my feet, and stroke my arms. Finally, after much coaxing, I let go. I remember, turning my body and thrusting myself out and ... swimming. Of course, the rest of the day I swam everywhere, all the time and protested mightily when it came time to get out.

I'm guessing that we all agree that we all have to learn to let go one time or another and one way or another, from clinging to the side of the pool to learning to ride a bicycle, to learning to drive, to having a child, to... you get the idea. Often it is simply learning a new task or new habit or new skill. Sometimes, it's deeper and more difficult: letting go of old hurts and injuries. Forgiving – and saying so. Or what's even more difficult – asking for forgiveness.

This is not easy. When we say goodbye to friends moving away or to our child going away to college, it hurts. Even more is the process of letting go of the ones we love the most in death. We know that letting go is part of life but that does not mean that it is easy.

But beyond that, being in Christ and knowing God is even more of always learning to let go. We never get it done. It's never finished.

One of the oldest understandings of Christian discipleship comes from the 6th century monastic movement and is called “*conversatio morum*,” which means a “commitment to a continual change of heart in relation to God.” It is the recognition that being in the presence of God requires an ongoing reorientation of one's entire being. Being changed never stops and seeing the need for change never stops. Knowing the living God allows us to know ourselves better and more deeply. In and through Christ we see our own failures and blindness and sins for what they truly are. We wrestle with them, struggle, pray, struggle, weep, and pray some more. But over time, we change and keep on changing.

But this much change, this much letting go, is overwhelming. It is exhausting. And we can get defensive: “how much more of this am I going to have to let go of? I mean, God, why don’t You let someone else do some letting go for a while and give me a rest?”

Over the past couple of years I’ve learned and read about “intersectionality,” which is about the overlapping, interdependence, and interconnection of race, class, gender, and even climate change, poverty, and violence. The injustices just keep on a coming and the need for work and change and letting go of old ways of thinking never stop. And soon, I discover that so many of these things are interconnected. For example, climate change affects first and most dramatically, those who live in marginalized areas. People, almost always in poverty, who live along the coast, along rivers, and who cannot afford to move to higher ground or better ground. Climate change hurts the poor, who around the world are also mostly people of color. So we deal with the intersectionality of climate change, poverty, and racism all at the same time. That’s a lot to deal with. That’s a lot to learn and face.

My first response after a while is to get tired and frustrated, even angry. I seek to let go, and let go, and then let go some more. But how much more do I have to let go? Somebody else do the letting go.

Except – when we are walking with the living God, there is always more grace. There is always more love and justice and empathy. There is always more energy to empower us to keep on changing. The key is to stay in relationship with Christ in prayer and worship. Only by deepening my roots in Christ and staying grounded in Christ’s community, the church, can I receive enough grace to keep on

letting go and learning to live more deeply in the new creation of the resurrected life.

Back in August the deacons and the leaders of the Finance Committee, had a day retreat with my dear friend, Dr. Larry Bethune, the retired pastor of the University Baptist Church in Austin. Larry talked with us about the myth of scarcity in contrast to the story of God's abundance. We fear we do not have enough – money, not enough resources, not enough energy, not enough grace. But God's story, the gospel of the living Christ is that in God's Way there is always enough, there is abundance. There is enough manna, enough grace, enough money, enough resources, and enough vitality and energy. In fact, there is so much more abundant life is that even death cannot contain it. The resurrection is just the first fruits of the so much more God has for us, if we'll only let go.

It's why we must gather every Sunday for worship together. In the presence of the living God but also in the presence of our sisters and brothers, God renews us. God's abundance washes over us and flows through us. Here in worship we let go of our old stories which diminish us, and reimagine our lives in God's new story that redeems, and enhances our lives. We learn to see differently, live differently, and imagine differently. We can let go and take the plunge into God's abundant life-giving new creation.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*, which is the last book in his *Chronicles of Narnia* series, the children and some of the animals arrive in the renewed and redeemed land. Before they had seen glimpses of it in their old land, but now they see it fully. One of the animals says, "I have come home at last! This is my real

country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now...Come further up, come further in!”

And at the conclusion, Lewis says, “And for us this the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

Let’s let go of our old stories. And together let’s live into God’s story. It’s a whole new world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.