

## Relinquishing and Receiving

Jeremiah 6:16; Isaiah 43:15-21; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-13

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Kyle Childress

Celebrating Our Thirtieth Anniversary

The first Austin Heights newsletter column I wrote thirty years ago referred to the French theologian and psychiatrist, Paul Tournier and his book, *A Place for You*. He says that the task of mature living consists in two things:

- (1) *Finding* a safe place for yourself.
- (2) *Leaving* that safe place in a new venture.

In other words, most of life is made up of either finding or leaving safe places. One is never safe for long but always between places. Which also means that we have a lot of anxiety because we're between places. The in between is the place of the unknown and what we've always counted on is behind us. At the same time, we're not sure what's in front of us. Always between places – never in a safe place for long – is unnerving, scary, and after awhile, it can get tiring.

Over these thirty years Tournier has continued to be pertinent to our shared lives. So much of our time together we have launched out into something new, trying new ministries, wrestling with new understandings of the faith, sticking our necks out, stepping out into the unknown. Rarely have we been at a place that felt entirely safe and secure. Seldom have we been where all felt like everything was right with the world.

I mention Tournier this morning partly because of looking back but mostly so we can look forward. Just to be clear: I'm not announcing my retirement this morning. I have no plans to retire and still love what I do. Nevertheless, you know and I know that at thirty years with you and forty years in ministry, I'm closer to retirement than I'm not. Thresholds and crossroads loom. Not because of me but because of the world we're living in and more importantly, because of the kind of God we follow, I believe we're called into an uncertain future. Which brings us to our reading from Hebrews 11.

Abraham and Sarah were near 75 years old when they got the word from God that they were to move. For 75 years they had lived a somewhat secure and safe life. Seventy-five years of accumulating stuff in the attic and in the basement; 75 years of getting that La-Z-Boy broken; 75 years of developing a routine and a pattern; 75 years of making a safe place. And God said, "I want you to move." So Abraham and Sarah started cleaning out and having yard sales and taking boxes of stuff to Goodwill. If they couldn't carry it with them they left it behind. And somewhere in the middle of the chaos they asked God where they were going and God said, "Just trust me." Abraham said, "You mean to tell me you want us to give up practically everything we have and leave this home of ours and not even know where we're going?" And God said, "That's right. You've got the idea!"

The writer of Hebrews says: "By faith Abraham obeyed...he went not knowing where he was going." Abraham and Sarah and their extended family traveled, lived in tents, paused here and there, but were always between places as they sought the promise God had for them.

Chapter 11 of Hebrews, known as “the roll call of the faithful,” begins with a definition of faith: “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,*” and then spends the rest of the chapter telling stories of people living and acting by faith – like Abraham and Sarah. This faith has nothing to do with proper belief or *finally being correct on all issues*. Faith is the very opposite of reaching a place and saying, “*Well, this is it. This is the truth. This is the way to do it. I’m turning my campsite into a home-site; I’m going to replace my tent pegs with a concrete foundation.*” No, faith is setting out with our feet; it is a dynamic trust in God demonstrated always between places. Faith has to be on the move or it is not faith.

Frederick Buechner says: “*Faith is better understood as a verb form than as a noun, as a process than a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you are going, but going anyway. A journey without maps.*”

Hear Lucy Shaw again, *The in-between is hard,/ the mid-air, the limbo/ between bank/ and bank/ the long leap (legs/ flailing, body un-/ grounded, askew in space)/ the scare/ of alien air,/ the interval of being/ in no place,/ having no where.*

Right after Jane and I arrived here someone said to me, “Now that you’re here, I’ll be glad when things get back to normalcy.” But for over thirty years normalcy has been change, and living in between. Normalcy for those of us who follow Jesus is following, movement, transformation, and change. The routine for us is being always between safe places. The safe places are the exceptions, the brief rest stops on the way. They are good and healthy unless we try to turn those temporary places of rest into permanent places where we stay.

Is it any wonder that one of our greatest temptations is to find our safe place and not just rest there but to stay there and build a wall to protect it? Anxious we bunker up against outside threats and not only do we not want to leave, we don't want anyone else to change anything. White nationalism and racism is about forting up, hunkering down, and protecting our so-called safe place – building walls around what is perceived as permanent. Fundamentalism is about pouring concrete and saying, “This is it. This is the truth. These are the eternal facts and nothing can change them and if anyone or anything threatens these written-in-stone facts, I'll correct, I'll fight, I'll attack, I'll double-down!”

Going through life trying to hold on and protect and build walls makes us defensive and suspicious, unable to trust and we end up grasping and fighting for what we feel is slipping away from us. In contrast, what Tournier called mature living, and what I call a faithful church and a faithful people, means learning to let go. Relinquishing.

As followers of Jesus always on the move, we learn that the only true constant is the God we know in Jesus Christ. Everything else we hold loosely. And much of that over time we learn to relinquish. To be able to follow Christ, to be able to move and to grow, to be changed and transformed means letting go of many things, perspectives, and habits that we previously thought were constant and fundamental. But we do not relinquish only. We relinquish in order to receive. God has new perspectives, new habits, new ways, and a new word for us, out there in front of us. But we cannot receive the new without letting go of the old.

In 1845 the ill-fated Franklin Expedition set out from England to find the Northwest Passage through the Arctic. They had their Royal Navy uniforms but no extreme cold weather clothing whatsoever. They equipped the ships with a 1200 volume library, a hand organ that played fifty tunes, china place settings and expensive silver flatware inlaid with each of the officers' crest and initials. These early Victorian era Englishmen took their world with them. Yet they only carried a twelve-day supply of coal for their auxiliary engines, even though they estimated the journey would last two to three years. Frozen in ice, the crew left the ships to find help, wearing their proper uniforms and carrying their silverware. Years later bodies were found lying out on the frozen ice or in shallow graves with their silver beside them. They were not able to relinquish the things and perspectives of Victorian England in order to survive the new conditions of the Arctic. And they perished as a result.

Both of our Old Testament readings today are addressed to people who are learning to relinquish in order to receive. Everything they relied upon, counted on, knew beyond a shadow of doubt was eternal and unending – was ending. Both Jeremiah and Isaiah are speaking to people going into exile in Babylon. The Babylonian Empire has destroyed God's eternal dwelling place, the Temple in Jerusalem, the essence of certitude and a reliable existence. Jerusalem is destroyed. Now what? What are we going to do? Where is God? What do we believe? How do we go on? Where do we go?

Jeremiah says, "Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls" (Jer. 6:16). The image comes to mind of Tom Hanks at the ending of the movie *Castaway*, where he's up in the Panhandle of Texas way out in the

middle nowhere, and he goes and stands out in the middle of the crossroads. He looks one way and then another. What's he going to do? Which way will he go? And the movie ends.

Jeremiah says when you're at the crossroads of your life remember the ancient paths. These are the old ways that still give life and will sustain you through an unknown future.

Isaiah is speaking to the same audience. He says, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Is. 43:18-19). And if you read back through the verses leading up to this, Isaiah speaks of images from the Exodus – parting the Red Sea and destroying the Egyptian army – and says "You can't dwell on those things anymore. This is a new day. You must learn to live and think and have faith that in new ways because I'm beginning to do a new thing and if you're tied to the old, you'll miss it."

The two greatest prophets of the Old Testament and one says remember the ancient paths that gave you life and return to them because they will still give you life. And the other says you can't return to the old ways, God is doing a new thing.

Which is it?

Both are the Bible. Both have been looked to for thousands of years for hope and encouragement and guidance. But which one for us today? It's as if we are in between. Maybe it's Jeremiah or maybe it's Isaiah. This is hard – the mid-air, the

limbo, between bank and bank, the long leap (legs/ flailing, body un-grounded, askew in space)... the interval of being.

We have to discern. We have to seek God, pray, listen, pay attention, know the Bible, look at our context, and pray some more – together. Discernment. Discernment means the answer is not easy and it's not something handed to you. Discernment takes time and work. There is no instant solution from the preacher. No clear, strong, concrete answer. Discernment seeks God, not “the” answer. Discernment is about faith and living in between.

And discernment is always about community in Christ. Lone rangers can't get it on their own, which is why so much of American white Christianity wants the quick and simple answer. We are such individualists that we can't do the hard and patient work of discerning together. We are to pray together – even if we're praying in our separate homes, because discernment is the work of the Holy Spirit among us, between us, in conversation, in silence, in sharing, in walking together and taking the leap together – in seeking God together.

It takes a community discerning together how we hear Jeremiah and how we hear Isaiah. It's not a simple matter that one is right and one is wrong. Indeed, they're both right, but how do we hear their word to us in our context, today, in this place?

What are the ancient paths that are life giving? What are the old practices that sustained a community through the parted sea and across the wilderness, relying on God? At the same time, what are old ways that are simply old and are

not life giving? What do we need to do together to discern or perceive the new thing God is doing? What do we relinquish in order to receive.

We live in the midst of so much change and most of us believe that more change is coming. How we did church in the 70's, 80's, and 90's will not suffice. We need to be light on our feet to be able to improvise and discern. But improvisation and discernment assumes that we have deep resources from which to improvise and discern. We don't simply make it up as we go and we can't reach down deep when there is nothing there. We seek God and God's new word but often the new word comes because we've been following the old paths. And we have to know the old paths.

This fall we're planning on several opportunities for you to learn the old paths and discern the new word. We're calling it: *Digging Deep: Rooted in Christ, Grounded in Community* and we'll talk a lot more about it in the weeks to come. One of the things we'll be doing is studying together Bill McKibben's book *Deep Economy* alongside the Bible. We'll view some films together and discern together what new word God has for us in a world of climate change, immigration and refugees, guns and violence, racism, LGBTQ bigotry, and on and on. How might we deepen our roots in Christ, so that we can help our wider community come together as neighbors and sisters and brothers? How do we raise children in such a world? How might we deepen our lives in prayer and the Bible so we can deepen the connections between us? In this in-between-world it will take all of us together to make it.

There's the old story of a general who came to inspect a company of paratroopers. He came to one soldier, a big guy, and asked, "How many jumps



have you made?” “Fifty-seven, sir,” the soldier replied. “Do you enjoy it?” “Yes, sir,” he said. The general came to the next soldier. He too was big, barrel chested, chin jutting out. “Soldier, how many jumps have you made?” “Forty-three, Sir!” “You proud to be a paratrooper?” “Sir, yes Sir!” The general walked along until he came to another soldier. This one was small, swallowed up by his uniform. “How about you?” asked the general, “How many jumps?” “Twenty-two, sir.” “Do you enjoy it?” “Oh, no, sir, I hate it. It scares me to death every time I jump.” The general asked him, “Man, why did you ever join the paratroopers?” And he replied, “Because I like to be associated with people who aren’t afraid to jump out of airplanes, sir.”

There are not many of us who like to jump. We do not even like to live in between. We prefer stability and permanence. But as a community of faith in Christ, Austin Heights, together we are not afraid to jump, to take the leap, and to get up and follow the God who is on the move. Often it is scary, often it is risky, and often it is tiring. But thanks be to God, Austin Heights Baptist Church, following Christ is rarely boring.

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