

Relinquishment

Philippians 2:4-11; Luke 9:23-25

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God is not found in the soul by any kind of addition, but by a process of subtraction.

-Meister Eckhart

Die before you die. There is no chance after.

-C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*

I'm coming to terms with getting rid of my books. At least, most of them. The task overwhelms me, partly because of the sheer physical labor of culling them, stacking them, hauling them, and so on. As you know, I have a lot of them, and I've been accumulating them for probably forty-five years. Books are the tools of a pastor who cares about learning and growing and who serves a congregation who cares about learning and growing. My books are the tools of my craft, used in sermon preparation and teaching and learning and thinking.

But many of these books are my friends, too. Many of the authors are friends and/or people I've corresponded with over the years. I learned a long time ago the importance of writing letters to authors usually with something like, "Why did you say [such and such] on page 217 when I know from the perspective of a local pastor [this and this]?" Often the authors would write back, and I would stick their letters in the pages of the books I was asking about. Those letters are still stuck in those books, along with my extensive notes and highlights, underlines, stars,

asterisks, and other marginalia, all representing my personal history and engagement with the authors, the books, and with ideas. My intellectual history is in many of those books. Much of who I have become can be traced on the pages of the books on my shelves. So, you can see why I feel overwhelmed by letting go of my books.

Nevertheless, one of the most fundamental spiritual practices across the centuries is the practice of letting go, or as it is usually called “detachment.” It is practiced in Buddhism and Christianity, and most all mystical faiths, training us to let go of what gets in the way of knowing God. We learn to detach ourselves from whatever entangles us so we might better attach ourselves to the truly important.

So, Jesus comes along at the beginning of the Gospels to Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John who are fishing and mending their nets. He calls them to follow him as disciples and they must drop their nets in order to follow. It does not mean their nets, or my books are bad or evil, it means that letting go of things like nets or books train us in letting go so we can let go of bigger things in our future. We develop habits of losing our stuff so when the big losses come, we are better able to face them, and we grow in habits of losing ourselves so we can better find ourselves in Christ and embrace the Christ-like practices of showing mercy. We can be merciful without being afraid or being threatened because we no longer hold ourselves and our ways too tightly.

American Christianity has always been in the context of consumer capitalism, and it tends to think in terms of addition, accumulation, taking in, attaining, protecting, performing, winning, and succeeding, earning points with God, attaining enlightenment. Whereas true spirituality is the opposite. 13th century

mystical theologian Meister Eckhart said, “God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction.”

Which is why we look to Jesus to show us what this looks like. Christ is our exemplar.

In our reading from Luke this morning, Jesus is speaking to his disciples, arguing with them and especially with Peter, about the Way of the cross. They cannot fathom that the Jesus Way is the way of suffering servanthood, giving up and letting go, and looking to the care and mercy of others. Some want Jesus to be successful by telling the crowds what they want to hear. Others want Jesus to protect himself and be defensive. Yet Jesus says, “If you want to follow me, you have to learn to deny yourselves [you have to learn to relinquish] and each and every day take up the cross – let go of yourselves so you can grab hold to the cross – and follow me. The paradox is that when you try to hold onto your life, hold onto your stuff, your ways, your way of looking at the world and protecting yourselves and building walls and getting guns and worrying about security, you’ll end up losing everything. But if you give up yourself and your way of life for my sake, you will end up finding yourself. You will become whole and complete” (Luke 9:23-24).

My old teacher, Fred Craddock used to say that when he was young, he thought Christian discipleship was like giving one big cash payment and then you were done. What he learned is that following Jesus is more like an installment plan. He went on:

“We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table. ‘Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.’

But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home.

Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul."

It is a daily giving up ourselves so we might better grasp onto Jesus and the Way of the cross – the way of mercy, the way of grace, the way of love and forgiveness, of patience and longsuffering.

The Apostle Paul told the young church in Philippi:

"Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to hold onto, but he let go, emptying himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And becoming a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross..." (Philippians 2:4-8).

The way of Christ is relinquishment. And relinquishing power is about as counter-cultural these days as it gets.

The summer before my senior year in high school, I was able to go on a student trip to parts of Europe, starting with Egypt. My parents went as sponsors. I wanted to travel light and worked hard at simplifying my baggage so it would not weigh me down. I remember getting my suitcase down below 20 lbs. On the other

hand, my mother's suitcase was over 90 lbs. Guess who would be handling her bag? Her 17-year-old-son. Me. First stop was Egypt in June. In that Sahara desert heat, Mom ended up leaving sweaters, a wool cap, wool socks, and who knows what else to the hotel staff. When we left Cairo to head to Greece, Mom's bag was down to below 50 lbs. She was learning the hard way how to travel light.

Letting go is training, discipleship, and relinquishment, so we can travel light and can more easily respond to the call of God. Over in Luke chapter 10, Jesus puts the disciples to work, sending out seventy of them in pairs into the wider world showing mercy and healing and bringing about wholeness. He tells them to travel light so they will be able to improvise. After leaving behind their baggage, they can more easily participate in the work of God in loving and healing the world.

When Austin Heights was founded in April of 1968, we intentionally kept the name Baptist. We kept it to name our beliefs and polity and how we do church and we kept it as a witness saying that we were a Baptist church connected to Baptists like Martin Luther King of the Civil Rights Movement, Walter Rauschenbusch of the Social Gospel Movement, and Roger Williams founder of the first Baptist church in America who introduced religious liberty and the whole idea of the separation of church and state into American religious thought.

I'm a life-long Baptist, and heir to at least five generations of Baptists but I've reached the conclusion that it is time for us to give up the name Baptist. Hear me clearly! I said give up the *name* but not give up our polity or beliefs or identity. We will remain baptist. But the word or name Baptist nowadays is a trigger word that provokes trauma and brings to mind hatred, mean-spiritedness, and closed-mindedness especially among the younger generation. I wish it were different and

it makes me sad. I grieve thinking about it, but I think it is time to leave behind the baggage of the name Baptist and be known as “Austin Heights Church” or more casually we will continue to be known as “Austin Heights.”

Over my thirty-five years, here. I continue to learn that part of our calling is to relinquish the baggage, and there are all sorts of baggage we have to let go and leave behind. We’re always on the move growing, learning, changing and the only true constant is the God we know in Jesus Christ. Everything else we are to hold loosely, so when the time comes, we can let it go. To be able to follow Christ in a changing world means 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 as I’ve said, we do not relinquish only. We relinquish so we can 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.

I first heard the theologian William Stringfellow in 1978 in a class at Baylor when he was visiting the campus. I met him in 1983 when I chauffeured him and Will Campbell from the Nashville airport to Vanderbilt for a lecture. Stringfellow was remarkable, a layperson, a lawyer with terrific theological insights and devout in his Episcopalian faith. His health was bad, and his demeanor was almost morose. At the same time, he enjoyed life the most when attending the circus. He loved the circus! He loved the noise, the crowds oohing and awing, the circus music, the clowns, the lion tamers, and elephants ... he loved it all.

Stringfellow saw the circus as a metaphor of the church in this world. There was danger and risk, and there was the comedy of clowns making fun of the high and mighty as a way of reminding us to not take the powerful so seriously, but his

favorite act was the trapeze. He admired the trapeze artist standing on a very small platform high above the crowd. The platform was that one small place of stability, the spiritual center of our lives from which we jump into the unknown. We leap to grasp a swinging bar heading toward us. Usually, we grasp this bar with both hands, legs, and arms, with which we hold on. After a while we jump again hoping that the second oncoming bar is well timed, at an easy angle and meant for us. Sometimes we sit on a particular bar during a long phase of our lives when everything seems to be stable and when the other bar does come, we hope it comes regularly and on time. But whether we are standing on the platform or swinging from a bar, sooner or later we have to let go of the bar we're holding in order to leap toward the new oncoming one.

Sometimes we are tired of all the leaping, plunging, and diving. We just want to sit where we are. We wrap our arms, hands, and legs tightly around whatever bar we are riding and have been riding for years, maybe decades. In those times we just want to rest. Perhaps we really like the bar we've been on for the past several years and we really don't want to let go of it. This is a pretty good place for us. Staying here seems like a darn good idea. But what we know is that sooner or later every bar loses energy and slows down, the view gets stale the energy stagnates, and the flow gets blocked. It means we've stayed in one place or at one level too long and we have to put a great deal of energy into generating movement in the swing until there is enough momentum to leap again.

And what we may or may not notice, is there are fewer and fewer trapeze artists wanting to swing on the same old bars in the same old way. The crowds look away at the elephants in one of the other rings or get some popcorn while the lion tamer gets ready to come out.

No bar, no matter how comfortable, is everlasting.

Nothing but God lasts forever. The church is most faithful and most alive when we step away from our small platform, grasp the bar as it swings toward us, then we lean forward into the unknown, feeling the wind in our face and the sensation of being in midair, until another bar comes toward us out of the darkness. Below us the crowd is waiting breathlessly looking up with mouths open, wide-eyed in anticipation. As the bar swings toward us, we swallow hard, prepare ourselves ... it looks like quite a leap. Oh God, please be with us. ... What will we do? Will we let go and take the leap into the unknown to grasp the next trapeze bar?

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