

Spiritual Practices for Abundant Living (even in a pandemic): Letting Go

Matthew 11: 25-30

July 5, 2020

Trinity-Listowel and Atwood United Churches

Introduction – Welcome to this my first video as the new minister for Atwood United Church and Trinity United Church in Listowel. I am recording this for Sunday, July 5, 2020 in the sanctuary of Trinity United Church in Listowel. In this time of pandemic, we are worshipping in a dispersed fashion so the sanctuary is empty here this morning except for my wife who is recording this for me. Sermon videos offering theological reflection on the scriptures in the context of daily life will be posted each week in time for viewing Sunday morning or whenever is most convenient for you. We also offer the opportunity to gather in Christian community on Sunday mornings via Zoom. We hope you will join us if you are able.

Over the course of the summer, I am going to be doing a sermon series that I have entitled Spiritual Practices for Abundant Living even in a pandemic using the lectionary readings from Matthew's gospel and today we are going to be exploring how letting go helps us on our faith journeys. Our Scripture this morning is found in Matthew's gospel, chapter 11, verses 25 to 30.

Scripture – Matthew 11: 25-30

Then Jesus prayed, "God, Creator of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise; for what you have hidden from the learned and the clever, you have revealed to the youngest children. Yes, God, everything is as you want it to be."

Jesus continued, "Everything has been handed over to me by God. No one knows God in the way that I do and no one knows me in the way that God knows me. Come to me, all you who labour and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for

I am gentle and humble of heart. Here you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.”

May God bless to us this reading from holy scripture. Amen.

Sermon

A story is told about a teacher who asked a class of children to bring a clear garbage bag and a sack of potatoes to school. In class, she had each child take out a potato and write the name of someone they hadn't forgiven on it and then place it in the bag. Some of the bags were mostly empty but many were quite full. She then asked the class to carry this bag around everywhere with them for a week.

As the students hauled those potatoes everywhere for a week, two things happened. First, they became aware of how very heavy they were even if they only had a few in their bag. Try carrying just one or two rocks in your pocket for a day. You'll be surprised how much they weigh by nightfall. Second, the potatoes deteriorated over they week as they baked in the sun, got dropped on the floor and otherwise endured the process of being hauled everywhere. Potatoes that you might have cooked and eaten at the beginning of the week turned into something rotten and disgusting that needed to be thrown in the garbage.

Often without realizing it, I think many of us are hauling around the spiritual equivalent of a sack of rotting potatoes. For some of us, it might be a collection of unforgiven slights or hurts like the teacher asked the children in her class to think about. For others, it might be something else – ungrieved losses, resentments, things we feel guilty about, regrets, expectations other people have of us, doubts we have about ourselves, fears we have about the future, kindnesses we failed to offer, injustices we failed to speak up about and so on. Our spiritual baggage isn't just one thing and what is most heavy in our lives will vary from person to person and from stage to stage in our lives.

If we want to live in the fullness of God's abundance, we have to take time periodically to look at what has accumulated in our sack of rotting potatoes. What unhealed hurts are we carrying? What fears or worries are holding us back? What burdens do we need to be released from in order to offer our best selves to the world? What do we need to put down so we can truly rest?

Jesus says "Come to me, all you who labour and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Here you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

This is good news – who amongst us doesn't want a light burden and a soul at rest? Following in the way of Jesus can help us to find that. But it isn't magic. It requires practice and intention. In order to live with a light heart amid all the struggles of the world and everyday life, we need to regularly take time to discern what we need to release or let go of.

Letting go has been a big theme in my life lately as I have said goodbye to a pastoral charge I was in relationship with for 12 years and moved over 2000 kilometres from Portage la Prairie, Manitoba to Listowel, Ontario. We wanted to make this move. We are delighted to be here. We feel like this is the place that God is calling us to at this time. And yet, it was very hard to get here and there are some ways in which my soul is still working on arriving. Making a change, even a welcome change, requires a lot of letting go.

The moving process invites discernment about what stuff means in your life. When you move, you have to touch everything you own at least twice – once to pack it and once to unpack it and put it in a new location. I never realized how much we had until we started trying to get ready for our move. We didn't want to move with more baggage, emotional or physical, than we needed. So with every item we had, we tried to ask ourselves a bunch of questions: Did we love it? What memories did it evoke? Was it in good shape? Would it need to be replaced soon? Had we once loved it but now

didn't have the same sense of joy when we held it? Had we purchased or acquired it somehow and then never used it? Were we only holding onto it because of guilt or worry or fear or nostalgia? What possessions and what aspects of our past were we ready to put down in order to have a lighter burden as we moved forward? Sometimes it was joyful to let go of things. Other times it was painful. Often it was a mix of both.

Whether or not we are physically moving, it can be a spiritually liberating process to examine our things and discern what is life-giving for us and what has become burdensome. Our culture tends to encourage the accumulation of stuff as a mark of success and worth but Jesus said take nothing for the road but the clothes you are wearing. While few of us are ready to take the radical step of selling everything we have, giving the proceeds to the poor and embracing extreme simplicity, for many of us, more spiritual abundance can be found in having less not more.

The goodbye process also invites discernment about what memories and experiences you want to treasure and which ones you want to release. As our move date approached, we had the opportunity not just to think about all the things and people we had loved and would miss but also to acknowledge the mistakes we had made, the frustrations and resentments we were carrying, the dreams we had not realized, and the disappointments we had not taken time to grieve in the busyness of everyday life. Change tends to shine a light on how we have been living and how we want to live in a way that we don't tend to do when everything stays the same.

For many, I think the current pandemic has provided an opportunity to notice some of these same things. Because so many things suddenly stopped in our lives, and everything was different whether we liked it or not, a bright light was shone on our everyday living. What did we have to give up that we sincerely miss? What are we grieving? What emotions or thoughts or dreams have come to the surface in us that might have been dormant for a long time? What are we truly delighted to be rid of from our lives if we are genuinely honest with ourselves? What have we been putting off or

undervaluing that we now want to make a priority? How do we want to live differently as a result of this experience?

I don't know about you but my life has yet to achieve perfection. I'm not perfect. My loved ones aren't perfect. The church communities I have served have not been perfect. The world is not perfect either. And so periodically it is important to take note of the guilt, the frustration, the regret, the resentment, the disappointment, the woundedness I have accumulated and with God's help to let go of as much as I can.

So this week, I invite you to prayerfully consider your sack of rotting potatoes. What are you hauling around that is getting in the way of abundant life? What is impeding your soul's ability to find deep rest and restoration? What is blocking your relationship with God, with self and with others?

Each of us will find different burdens in our bag. Sometimes noticing something heavy that we are carrying is all we need to let it go. I find that is often the case for me with disappointment or envy. When I can acknowledge that I am disappointed by something or that I am envious of someone else then I am already well on the way to letting it go. Other times, noticing is just the first step in a process. Maybe I need to grieve something. Maybe I need to talk to a trusted friend or confidante. Maybe I just need time to be ready to release something. Maybe this is one of those things that is going to take a lot of prayer and reflection before I can release it into God's care.

Trying to rush or force the process may just add new potatoes to our bag. If we are trying to let go of feelings of failure, that may not be helped by feeling like we are failing at letting go of failure. Similarly, if we are trying to release a burden of worry, that is unlikely to be helped by worrying about our inability to stop worrying. Maybe I'm the only one who feels guilty about feeling guilty or resentful of how difficult it can be to let go of my resentments. Letting go requires humility and trust that in God's time and

with our cooperation, we will be able to let go of those things we need to release.

Nevertheless, Jesus's invitation to us as people of faith is to let go of those things which are burdensome to our souls so that we can truly rest in God and be restored for service in the world. Hear again this teaching of Jesus and let it wander around in your heart and mind this week:

Jesus says "Come to me, all you who labour and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Here you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

May it be so. Amen.