

Letting Go
Matthew 4:1-11
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Patty was in her mid-thirties and had been married for eleven years when she sought help from a private therapist. She had few friends, had gained over eighty pounds, didn't know what she was feeling, and if she did, felt guilty for feeling that way.

She explained that she tried to stay active by helping her friends and doing volunteer work for various organizations including her church, but her efforts usually resulted in feelings of ineffectiveness and resentment. She thought about returning to work, but she didn't. "All I know is nursing," she said, "and I'm sick and tired of taking care of people."

"My family and friends think I'm the tower of strength. Good old dependable Patty. Always there. Always in control. Always ready to help them. "The truth is," Patty said, "I'm falling apart, very quietly but very certainly. I've been depressed for years. I can't shake it. I cry at the drop of a hat. I don't have any energy. I scream at the kids all the time. I feel guilty all the time about everything. I even feel guilty about coming to see you," she told the counselor.

Over the years, I've met a number of people like Patty in the life of the church. People who are busy attending to the needs of those around them, busy worrying about other people's problems and filled with anxiety for taking on those problems, busy trying to fix people, so busy wrapped up in the lives of others - family, friends, and loved ones -- that they have neglected themselves and their own needs. They are often angry and resentful for what they perceive has been dumped on them, and carry the world on their shoulders, as if the world was their exclusive responsibility. Despite their best efforts to maintain control of everyone and everything--in essence, to play God--the reality is that their lives are often out of control.

"It's difficult to explain exactly what the problem is," said Patty. "There's no major problem I can point to and say, 'that's what's wrong.' But it feels like I've lost myself. "

Jesus, as he traveled through the Judean wilderness for forty days and nights faced that same temptation from the devil: to take control, to play God. Whether it was turning stones into bread, being rescued from jumping off the pinnacle of the temple, or wielding power over the kingdoms of the world, each time the devil enticed Jesus to do more than was humanly possible, to play God. And each time Jesus is tempted to cross that boundary, he surrenders -- not to the devil, but to his Creator.

What is surrendering? What does it mean to "let go"? Surrendering is acknowledging the authority of God and allowing God to be in charge of our lives. Letting go is trusting that authority on a daily basis.

Jewish Rabbi and noted author Harold Kushner told a group of physicians: "You are in a profession that calls on you to give to others, to care for people, to feel their pain and their anger, and to do this you *have* to be able to trust God. Otherwise, you will run dry.

If you spend your love and your strength and your compassion on others, and you have no Source from which to replenish it, then one day you will find yourselves depleted of love and depleted of strength. You will start to resent people for bringing up their problems. You will end up short-changing your family, and you will find your job more than you can handle. If you have no source of strength other than yourself, you will end up burned up and burned out."

What do we need to surrender and let go of? Our past, present, and future. Our anger, resentments, fears, hopes, and dreams. Our failures, successes, hate, love, and desires. We let go of *our* time frame, *our* old messages, *our* personal shortcomings. We let go of the people we love because we can't solve their problems. We let go of the crazy situations of our lives because

we can't manage them. And sometimes, we let go of ourselves, giving us the courage to face who we really are.

The German born Swiss novelist and painter Herman Hesse wrote many years ago, "Some of us think holding on makes us strong; but sometimes it is letting go."

We release our guilt and shame over not being good enough. We let go of the things that work out and the things that don't, things we've done, and things we haven't done. We let go of our unsuccessful relationships and our healthy relationships. We let go of the good, the bad, the painful, the fun, and those situations that aren't much fun. *We release it all* and start trusting God with our lives.

This anonymous poem spoke to my heart:

To let go does not mean to stop caring,
It means I can't do it for someone else.
To let go is not to cut myself off,
It's the realization I can't control another.
To let go is not to enable,
But allow learning from natural consequences.
To let go is to admit powerlessness, which means
The outcome is not in my hands.
To let go is not to try to change or blame another,
It's to make the most of myself.
To let go is not to care for,
but to care about.
To let go is not to fix,
but to be supportive.
To let go is not to judge,
but to allow another to be a human being.
To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all of the outcomes,
but to allow others to affect their destinies.
To let go is not to be protective,
It's to permit another to face reality.
To let go is not to deny,
but to accept.
To let go is not to nag, scold or argue,
but instead to search out my own shortcomings and correct them.
To let go is not to adjust everything to my desires,
But to take each day as it comes and cherish myself in it.
To let go is not to criticize or regulate anybody,
But to try to become what I dream I can be.
To let go is not to regret the past,
But to grow and live for the future.
To let go is to fear less and love more
And
To let go and to let God, is to find real peace.

"This is what I've learned about surrender," one man wrote recently. "One day, my daughter got a sliver in her finger. It really hurt and I had to take it out. But taking it out hurt

too. I held my daughter on my lap. I talked softly to her. I tried to be gentle. But she kicked, screamed, and fought all the way.

I tried to tell her that if she relaxed and stopped fighting, it wouldn't hurt so much. I tried to tell her if she just trusted me, the pain would be gone before she knew it. But she was too scared to trust. When I got the sliver out, she was so mad she just cried and beat on my arms. It hurt that she didn't trust me. It hurt more that she had made her pain worse than it had to be."

Many of us surrender and let go the hard way, by struggling through frustration, intense desire over what *we* want, anger, hurt, and fear -- to that cherished point of yielding, that moment when we loosen our grasp over others and ourselves. When we do, something transformative begins to happen. When we stand unencumbered by the past or the future, with empty hands and open arms, we'll find a loving, caring God who fills us with what *God* chooses. And we can trust what God gives us because it will be good.

And so, my friends at Westminster, as we stand beside Jesus in whatever wilderness we find ourselves this Lenten season, may we follow his example. What do you need to let go of this morning? What anger, what disappointment, what hurt, what person or unmanageable situation do you need to turn over to God this morning? Maybe you need to let go of yourself, face yourself and your feelings with courage, and release your own life to God. If so, Lent can be your season of letting go and turning it over to God.

Amen.