

When We Let Go and Release

Deuteronomy 15:1-11 & Matthew 19:16-22

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Every seventh year you must cancel all debts. This is how the cancellation is to be handled: Creditors will forgive the loans of their fellow Israelites. They won't demand repayment from their neighbors or their relatives because God's year of debt cancellation has been announced. Now if there are some poor persons among you, say one of your fellow Israelites in one of your cities in the land that God is giving you, don't be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your poor fellow Israelites. To the contrary! Open your hand wide to them. You must generously lend them whatever they need.

*Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 7-8
Common English Bible*

A man approached him and said, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus said, " Why do you ask me about what is good? There's only one who is good. If you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments." The man said, "Which ones?" Then Jesus said, " Don't commit murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." The young man replied, "I've kept all these. What am I still missing?" Jesus said, " If you want to be complete, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me." But when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

*Matthew 19:16-22
Common English Bible*

Money. Do we have enough? Do we have too little? Do we have too much? More than we need? Possessions. Do we have enough? Do we have too many? More than we need? Maybe it depends. Now think about - Do we picture ourselves being tight-fisted, holding tightly onto what we have?

I remember seeing a bumper sticker a few years ago – “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” Really?? Sounds like sermon material to me. We all have our own experiences, history, and attitudes toward money and things. What has value and how that affects how we see our value, our worth. Think about what do we hold onto and what do we let go of.

Releasing is an important practice. We release things that we love and offer them to others. We release things that because we have more than we need. We release things that hurt us. We release things in order to pass them along to the next generation. Other times, we release things that need to die in order that new things might grow in their place.

This concept is not a new one for us. Letting go is a spiritual practice. It is important in the context of a society that teaches us to hoard resources and take more than we need. Today we celebrate who we are as a church and what it means to be good stewards of what we have. Today we remember two Bible passages that talk about “release” - one in the context of individual release and, the other, communal release. I found the reflections from Rev. Stephen Fearling very meaningful on this theme and these passages. (1)

In today’s passage from Matthew’s Gospel, a man comes up to Jesus with a very specific question. He asks him, “what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Notice he doesn’t say what do I need to do to have eternal life. Instead, he asks what *good deed* must I do to have eternal life. It appears that the man is looking for a simple answer. He wants to know the exact amount of pocket change he has to deposit in the heavenly vending machine in order to receive eternal life. He’s looking for a simple transaction that reflects the economics that he has come to expect. If you pay for A, then you get A. Transaction complete.

But Jesus’ reply is certainly not what the man wanted to hear. He says “If you wish to be complete or in some translations “perfect,” then go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will receive treasure in heaven; then come, follow me”

We have five verbs there and their order is important: **go, sell, give, receive, and follow.**

The man in the story, as far as we know, only got as far as the first verb, go. Maybe that is what we are tempted to do with this story. Leave it behind and move on to another part of the Bible that doesn’t ask such ridiculous, and hard, things of me. And yet, Jesus so often about money and possessions.

But maybe there is an invitation to notice how our spiritual lives and our money and our possessions are connected. What are we holding? What are we called to release?

What is Jesus calling us to do? I struggle with this passage. I live in Marin County now and have financial responsibilities like a mortgage, medical expenses, and other responsibilities. We are saving more for retirement now that our youngest is out of college. I cannot literally just give everything away. But maybe there is a deeper truth.

I believe this story is about relationships. We have relationships with everything - people, objects, concepts, the earth, and, yes, money. Ultimately, I believe that Jesus knew that this man’s relationship with his possessions was keeping him from living fully into the relationships with himself and his neighbors. When our relationship with money damages our relationship with self and neighbors, it keeps us from abundant life, the kin-dom of God. The man in today’s story was in a toxic or idolatrous relationship with his possessions. They kept him from embracing the *communal* nature of the Beloved Community. Jesus didn’t teach us to pray “give me this day my daily bread” but “give us this day our daily bread.”

The man in today's story clearly has much to release, to let go of, in order to free himself up. What is holding you down? What do we need to let go of and release its hold on us? Do your possessions keep you from being in relationship with yourself? Your neighbor? What do you need to release to get the order of those verbs right - to go, sell, give, receive, and follow?

In our passage from Deuteronomy, Moses is reminding the Hebrew people that God requires them to let go of their grip on money, people. Every 7 years and rest and reset. Every 7 years a special Sabbath and then every 7 X 7 (plus 1) 50 years Jubilee. All debts forgiven, all slaves freed, all land returned. Reset. Release.

Maybe part of the way we can loosen our grip and release is to think about our relationship with this congregation. How do you feel connected here? How do you feel fed here? How do you feel comforted and loved here? How do you feel challenged and stretched here? What would it mean to say, "I am going to practice letting go and giving in a more intentional way this year. Loosen my grip. I am going to pledge or increase my pledge." For me the opportunity to serve and be part of this congregation is an amazing gift. Every year Jeffrey and I talk about what we will pledge to the church. We pledge out of gratitude to God, out of joy, out of responsibility and out of hope.

When we take a step back, Moses and Jesus were teaching that there are two different scripts. That these two scripts are all around us, and are certainly all throughout the whole biblical narrative.

In the Dominant Script, the powerful matter, the weak do not. Having more makes you better, your worth is earned, others are nothing more than a competition for resources or an obstacle in your way. Life begins in self-sufficiency, and you'd better not screw up. There is not enough to go around so take what you can get before someone else does. God is keeping score, we should be too. Hold on tight to what you have. That's the first script.

The other one, the Kin-dom of God script, says that it all begins in gift, and abundance. You are made by God for connection and communion. You are loved just as you are. On this journey of life that begins in gift and ends in connection and communion, the people journeying alongside you are neighbor, friend, brother and sister, not threats, rivals or competitors. You need each other to be whole, and what we have is for sharing. Life doesn't make sense alone and isolated and against; you are created for relationship with God and with each other, and there is no such thing as one without the other. God is generous to us. So generosity is our calling. To be more and more generous.

One is the script of fear.

The other is the script of hope.

One is a script that requires keeping our hands clenched around what is ours. Mine.
The other invites us to loosen our grip, open our hands, and see what we can share.
To practice generosity.

And daily, we are given many, many chances to choose which way we will live, and which message we will believe.

Which script will you live in?

We get this shot at being this community of followers of the teachings of Jesus together.
How will we live it?

If it's all gift, given by the generosity and grace of God, inviting us to join Spirit in sharing life with each other in love and hope – how will we be part of it?

How will we spend the years, the days and hours, the resources and relationships that we have? What will they be for?

As a church we can look at the facts – going to church and being part of a church is less the norm now than ever. Been true in Marin County for a long time. The facts – our congregation is not as large as it once was. What is the future? Can we maintain the building and staff?

But the other voice, gently asserts that God says to us:

You are my beloved. I have a purpose for you. You are not just to exist or survive; you are a beacon of hope and a place of sanctuary! You are given to each other and your community to share each other's burdens and joys, and to seek God together, living into the Beloved Community.

Which voice will we trust? Are we tight fisted or open handed?

Let's continue to listen and discern. Here in FPCSR together we deepen connections to the Holy One and each other. We find ways to use our money and resources in building the Beloved Community together. It takes commitment, it takes humility and compassion. Being open to the Source of Love, loving ourselves, loving our neighbors, releasing & sharing the light Christ offers, engaging in the economy of grace. Let's practice generosity with open hands and open hearts. Amen.