

Let Go and Let God
Sermon: Lent 4C
March 6, 2016

St. Stephen's Belvedere
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[Joshua 5:9-12](#)
[2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#)
[Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)
[Psalm 32](#)

Two weeks ago, Malcolm preached about lies, telling lies. And in our Lenten Soup Supper discussion the following Wednesday, Joe Jennings commented that the worst lies are those we tell ourselves. I thought a lot about that. The worst lies are those we tell ourselves. What lies do I tell myself? Probably the one at the top of my list is the belief that I'm in control. Anyone else tell themselves that? I walk around every day thinking that I'm in control. But it's a lie. It's a big lie.

In 2004, I started working at St. John's in Ross and the bookkeeper there used to always say, "Let go and let God." I thought that was truly the most insane thing I'd ever heard. I remember thinking that was just a slacker mentality. I'd spent my entire academic and professional career being groomed to rely upon my own skills, to do things perfectly, and to operate at a 150% level. To suggest that I should let go and let God was ludicrous. I'm in control and I have to get things done! Let go and let God. Are you kidding me!?

But what I've learned in the past 12 years is that letting go of control is at the root of Christian discipleship and in particular, it's the root of forgiveness, both receiving it and granting it to others. The main theme of today's scriptures is forgiveness and I can see the role of control running throughout. This morning, I'm only going to focus on granting forgiveness to others and will talk about receiving forgiveness and the Prodigal Son on Wednesday night. So come to the Lenten Soup Supper if you want to explore some of the challenges and ways of receiving forgiveness.

Now, granting forgiveness. Let's start with Paul's letter to the Corinthians. First, the background to this passage is that Paul had been grievously betrayed by his community in Corinth. Many scholars believe this was the most difficult event in Paul's whole recorded ministry. They call it "the Corinthian Incident." One member of his most beloved church had stirred up the other members to question Paul's very apostleship, his identity and leadership, and his vision of the gospel of Christ. And the congregation hadn't defended Paul. Paul was devastated; he felt betrayed. He wrote to them about it in what is called the

“letter of tears,” and he also wrote a series of furious, scathing attacks on his opponents. Ultimately the congregation realized their folly and the ringleader of the opposition became persona non grata.

So what we’re hearing today is one of Paul’s meditations on his experience of betrayal, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Paul gives us direction about how to forgive others and it has to do with our point of view about who’s in control. Paul says, “from now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way...All this is from God...be reconciled to God.” All this is from God, be reconciled to God. The starting point for forgiveness and reconciliation is turning to God, not our human understanding, not our own sense of control and mastery.

We can’t grant forgiveness on our own. And I’m talking about those big ones, not when someone forgets to take out the garbage or bounced a check to us. No, I’m talking about forgiveness with a capital F. Betrayal, cheating, huge lies, major attacks, and the like. We need God to help us forgive those actions. All we can do is turn to God, nurture and build our relationship with God, and only then can God work in us to allow us to forgive others.

Giving up control is the first step. It means we accept our complete reliance upon God. You know: the group that wrote the best selling handbook on forgiveness is actually Alcoholics Anonymous. If you aren’t already familiar with the twelve steps, go home today and Google them. There’s no better road map for seeking or granting forgiveness.

But there’s another group of experts on forgiveness. I had the opportunity a few summers ago to worship every Sunday at the Catholic chapel in San Quentin. I returned to San Quentin a few weeks ago with George Brown and Jim Ward to celebrate the closing ceremony of a men’s Kairos weekend. I’ll bet George, after spending many hours with San Quentin inmates over several years, has an understanding of forgiveness that far surpasses anything most of us have witnessed or experienced. I encourage you to speak with George about his experiences at San Quentin.

Another friend of mine who has also worshipped at San Quentin once told me it was her favorite place to worship because she said it was the only church she’d ever been to where everyone there really knows they are sinners. I see what she means. There is joy in their worship service like I’ve never seen before. But I think it’s not so much because the inmates know they’re sinners, but because they’ve found a way to forgive whoever inflicted some terrible wound on them earlier in life that led them to commit horrendous crimes. Remember when I told you that 70% of San Quentin inmates are products of the foster care system? These are deeply wounded and traumatized men, many of whom haven’t come to terms with the pain and abuse they experienced as children, so it turned into rage and violence. Never an excuse, but something of an explanation. So, those men in the Catholic chapel? Their healing, their joy came when they could offer forgiveness to the people who had perpetrated violence against them.

It's human nature to hold onto an insult, a betrayal, or wound. But here's the deal: Forgiveness means letting go of all hope for a better past [repeat]. As Paul says, "everything old has passed away." It doesn't mean forgetting or approving of something wrong, but it does mean realizing that you can't control the past anymore. You can, however, accept that it happened, and then hand it over to God.

When we hand things over to God, God gives us the ability to forgive. It often takes time for us to really hand it over to God, but when we do, grace abounds. When we reconcile ourselves to God, as Paul tells us, when we give all our attention to our source of life abundant, we are given the power to forgive others.

This brings me to our Opening Collect today which seems so out of place with our readings because it talks about Jesus being the "true bread which gives life to the world." It seems out of place because this isn't a Sunday with a gospel story about Jesus as the bread of life. But as I thought about it, I realized that what we memorialize in our Eucharist each Sunday, in the bread and in the wine, is the belief that when Jesus gave up everything, gave up all control, when he spread out his arms and surrendered his life to God, God swooped in and transformed that into something mysterious and life giving. On the cross, Jesus forgave the soldiers who crucified him and divided up his clothes, and he forgave the thief hanging next to him, and after his resurrection, he forgave Peter for denying him. When we eat the true bread, we take in Christ and we pray to be able to do as Christ did. We forgive. When we let go of our sense of control, with God's help we can forgive others. Let go. Let go and let God.

Amen.