

## LET GO BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

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Jesus said, "*The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.* (Matthew 13:44)

Not long ago – I think it was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend – I saw a blimp flying over Manhattan. I've always liked blimps, and seeing this one reminded me of a certain story about the USS Akron. The Akron was a rigid air ship from the early 1930's. These were days of the Hindenburg, when aviators thought that the lighter-than-air behemoths were destined to rule the skies. The Akron was nearly 800-feet long and could carry up to one-hundred crew and passengers on flights across the globe.

One day after a difficult voyage from New Jersey to California, the Akron was preparing to dock in San Diego for refueling. Ten-thousand people gathered near the mooring mast to watch. The ship appeared in the sky, began her descent, and dropped what were called "spider lines" for two-hundred navy recruits on the ground to grab. Their job was to pull the ship down and secure her. What they hadn't counted on, however, was the sun's warming effect on the California ground. Suddenly, with two-hundred sailors holding the lines, a gust of rising hot air caught the ship in its updraft and began lifting her into the sky again. Most of the sailors clinging to the lines instantly let go and fell a few feet back to the ground unharmed. Another man let go at twenty-feet and suffered only a broken arm. These let go and lived. Three men, however, did not let go. One was able to find a foothold, lash himself to the cables, and wait for an hour to be pulled up into the cabin. The other two who did not let go were not as lucky. As the ship shot into the sky they held on until it was too late, and soon fell hundreds of feet to their deaths. The story speaks a terrifying parable that makes one, clear point: let go before it's too late.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us five parables about the kingdom of God. Have you ever wondered, What is Jesus talking about when he refers to the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven? In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the term 'eternal life' to describe the same thing. But what does he mean? Let me tell you how I understand it: when Jesus spoke parables about the kingdom of God, what he seems to have meant is that heaven is advancing on earth. Heaven is slowly, silently, steadily, but sometimes abruptly taking over here on earth, and in our lives. The kingdom of God is the life that God wants to give us taking over the life that the world tries to force us to live. It's a bottom-up process, not top-down. It happens from within as much if not more so than from beyond. So the kingdom of God, says Jesus, is like a mustard seed taking over a field; it is like yeast taking over a lump of dough; it is like treasure hidden in a field, or a pearl of great price taking over a man's life; it is like a net that fishermen cast into the sea sweeping across and taking over the waters. The central message of Jesus is that God is taking over; God is advancing from all directions on this life of ours, and nothing or no one can stop God.

What is our responsibility, if anything, as the kingdom of God takes over here on earth? I believe the parables we have heard give us a clue. What we have to learn how to do is let go of anything and anyone who would carry us away from it. Listen again: *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.* To me, the point of the parable has nothing to do with who the man was, what he was doing out in the field, or who buried the treasure in the first

place. The point is that when he stumbled upon it – when this new reality came upon his life – he was able to recognize its surpassing value, and with great joy let go of his old life. The merchant in search of fine pearls did the same thing. When he finally discovered one that he knew was above all others – when this new reality came upon his life – he was able to let go of all that he had in order to possess it.

Christ's parable of the net tells the same story about our need to let go. The net that the fishermen placed in the water was called a drag-net. It was weighted on the bottom, and attached at each end to a boat that pulled it ashore. As the net advanced toward the shore, whatever reality of fish and plant life that existed in its path got caught up in the net and brought to shore. The fish could hold on and swim against it, but to no avail. In like manner, the kingdom of this world is going to give way. From deep within the kingdom of heaven is going to sweep across reality as we know it and replace it. We too can try to hold on to what is, or what was, or what never was, but that is a futile task: sooner or later we all have to let go. Letting go is the Christian calling as the kingdom of heaven supplants the kingdom of this earth: letting go of the old life, so that God might hand us his new life. Letting go is the secret; letting go is the mystery of the kingdom of God.

Let go. Release your anxious grip on life. Normally I tend to be careful about spouting clichés, especially from the pulpit. But I must admit that some phrases become clichés because they speak a world of truth. One such phrase is this: Let go and let God. I think that cliché, with special emphasis on the first two words, very nearly captures the calling of the Christian life. Let go. The longer I struggle to be a follower of Jesus, the more I realize it's first a matter of letting go. You can't follow Jesus until you let go. Those of you who were here last week will remember the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). A farmer who planted a good crop of wheat found it to be infested with weeds. When his servants suggested that they rush out to the field and pull up the weeds, the farmer told them to wait. He was able to release his anxious grip on the situation, and trust that all things work together for good to those who love God. Two weeks ago it was another farmer who was able to let go of the seed that fell upon the soils (Matthew 13:1-9). He suffered little over soils that were unproductive, and concentrated instead on the good soil. In today's Old Testament reading we heard how Solomon was able to let go. Solomon let go of his desire for great riches and vengeance over his enemies and asked God instead for the wisdom to discern good from evil. Again and again, in parable after parable, in the Old Testament and the New, I hear the gospel message of grace telling us to let go.

Letting go is easier said than done. Not long ago I was speaking to someone who was telling me how he had chanced upon the perfect parking place directly in front of his apartment in the West Village. The next morning he came out to discover that one of the tires was flat. His brother was visiting at the time, so the two of them jacked up the car and put on the spare. Then, instead of simply putting the flat tire in the trunk and driving to the nearest service station, the man began rolling the tire by hand the ten blocks he would need to go. His brother protested, "Why don't we just drive it there?" "Are you kidding?" replied the man. "And let go of the best parking place I've ever had?" Imagine, the purpose of a car is to drive the blasted thing, not park it. Sometimes not letting go can take us to ridiculous extremes.

Later on in his life, even King Solomon couldn't resist being carried away by the lure of personal wealth and power. Yes, Solomon prayed for wisdom. Yes, Solomon built for the Lord a glorious Temple. But the luxurious house that Solomon built for himself was *four times* the size of this house that he built for God. Can you blame him? You'd need a big house, too, if you had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Talk about ridiculous extremes! Along the way it seems that Solomon forgot how to let go. Sometimes it's too late when we realize that we should have let go long ago.

How hard that is to let go! How hard it is to let go of grudges and grief, to let go of possessions and prejudices, to let go of regret, to let go of ourselves before it's too late. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for some of us to let go and let God be at the core of our beings. Here's the paradox with us: we think that holding on is the key to life. We think that gripping our gripes and grievances will bring about personal satisfaction. But it never does. Those who can't let go – won't let go – often wind up being carried away to deadly places. Yes, deadly places.

Are we able to let go? Jesus seemed to think that we are. The farmers let go. The man who found the treasure let go. The merchant who found the pearl let go. In lifting these up before us, Jesus invites us to do the same: to let go and live by grace. Grace means that you have God's permission, even God's encouragement, to release your clenched-fist approach to life and trust that God is for you. And if God is for you, who or what can be against you? Sometimes letting go is a finger-by-finger process. Sometimes letting go is the art of not picking up certain things in the first place. Sometimes letting go is a painful, agonizing choice.

In his book, Friedman's Fables, the late Rabbi Edwin Friedman tells a parable about the agony and necessity of letting go. It seems that after many years of frustration a man was finally making progress on his spiritual journey. As the man walked along the road of his pilgrim way, he came to a bridge built high above a river. The man knew that his destiny and salvation were on the other side, and all he had to do was cross the bridge. Perhaps it was God himself who awaited him. Half way across the bridge, however, he encountered another traveler who, strangely, had a long, thick rope tied around his waist. When the two met, the one with the rope asked the pilgrim if he wouldn't mind holding the loose end for a moment. Somewhat surprised, the pilgrim took hold of the rope. The man with the rope tied around his waist said, "two hands, now, and remember, hold tight." And upon saying this, he jumped over the bridge.

With all his might the pilgrim braced himself and held on to the rope. He looked down and saw the other traveler dangling by the cord some thirty feet below. The pilgrim yelled to him, "What are you trying to do? Pull yourself up." The man dangling from the rope called back up, "Just hold tight. I am your responsibility." The pilgrim cried back down, "Why did you do this? I cannot pull you up." The man at the end of the rope replied, "Just remember, my life is in your hands. If you let go, I will be lost."

The pilgrim looked to the end of the bridge and saw his destination. He could find no place to tie the rope so he could move on. Meanwhile his own muscles, mind, and spirit ached from the strain of holding up the other, and he feared that he himself would be pulled over the edge. Finally he offered to the man dangling by the rope all the help he could give in pulling him up, but the man must be willing to climb. Otherwise, the pilgrim would continue his journey. "You decide how this ends; it's your choice," said the pilgrim. The man dangling from the rope shrieked, "You cannot mean what you say. You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me." The pilgrim waited a moment, but could feel no change in the tension of the rope. "I accept your choice," said the pilgrim at last. And he freed his hands. The pilgrim let go before it was too late.

What might you be clinging to that is preventing you from taking hold of the life that really is life? Let go before it's too late. Jesus said, "*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*" The kingdom of heaven, eternal life belongs to those who let go.