

“It’s Okay to Let Go”

Matthew 10.24–33 & Romans 6.1–11

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 19 June 2005

Literally the day I arrived in Fort Collins, I was made aware that in parish ministry clergy are privileged to be intimately connected to living and dying. I had just driven to Fort Collins from Newton, Kansas, closed on our house, and headed out to the home of Ruth and Bruce Lieurance, where I was spending the night. I knew that Bruce’s mom was in hospice near the end of a battle with cancer. When I got there, Ruth told me that Bruce was with his mom, so Rusty and I went over after dinner. We were with Gerry for about 45 minutes before she died. I heard Bruce say something that I often say to people as they approach the end of life: **“It’s okay to let go.”**

That’s an important message for us all to hear, not just at the end of life, but in the midst of life. *It’s okay to let go.* When your mom or dad was teaching you to ride a two-wheeler, you were probably nervous about not being steadied by those adult hands holding onto the bike. And if you’re like most of us, you weren’t ready to tell that parent, “It’s okay to let go.” But, your mom or dad somehow knew that it was okay to let you go on your way.

I haven’t had the experience of having a child grow up and leave home to begin college or to start a family, but in many of the families I’ve observed, the roles are reversed: it is the son or daughter who knows that it’s okay to let go, and the parents who cling onto their precious child. Those transitions are difficult, even in the best of circumstances.

Just as an acorn must fall from an oak tree, shed its shell and then germinate to start a new oak, so we must be willing to fall, shed our skin, and undergo some transformation. (But the acorn is no longer an acorn; it has died to its old self and has been reborn as an oak tree.) And we don’t need to be afraid of the process, because we’re in God’s hands. That means not fearing change; not fearing growth; not fearing wise risk-taking. And it’s a tall order.

I’ll claim that the Christian life is a journey of change and growth and transformation – of continual deaths and rebirths – that need us to say, “It’s okay to let go.” I’ll say more about that later.



All of us have gone through some sort of a transformation experience. Each of us have made the journey from the warmth and security of the womb out into the cold, bright world. In spite of the shock of that transition, the vistas are much broader out here, because none of us had a womb with a view.

For many young men in my dad’s generation, it was going through the experience of being in the military during the Second World War. When my dad left the service, he was not the same man who went in. He was engaged when he went into the Air Corps and broke off the engagement after returning from the Pacific. He was not the same person.

An even more pointed story is one that I learned more about at our conference Annual Meeting last weekend. Malcolm Himshoot is a UCC minister in Denver, whom I had met on several occasions. He is one of the brighter students I’d met, and he was ordained to urban ministry in Denver last year. Something that I didn’t know about Malcolm was that he was born as Miriam. The UCC has co-produced his story in the film, *Call Me Malcolm*, which we got to see last weekend. In the film, he talks about his parents’ difficulty in calling him Malcolm, and he reflects that “that person is no more”

and that he feels that a new life has started. When Paul talks about dying and rising, I think about Malcolm's story. The old life is dead and a new one has begun.

We probably all have a story to tell like that concerns dying to an old way of being and rising to a new way of living, even if it isn't as dramatic as Malcolm's story. Some of us lived with addictions that defined who we were; we've gotten into recovery, let the old self-definition die and found new life. Some of us have lost a spouse and been forced into a new life on our own. There are those among us who have overcome economic hurdles to obtain an education and level of career achievement. Think for a moment about your story: *When have you been existed in an old life and found yourself letting go and living into a new life?* These journeys of dying and rising are all around us.

Some of you know about (and have prayed for) a man who was incarcerated at the Larimer County Detention Center and who saw our UCC television ad. (The one that says, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here.") When I visited him, he told me that when he saw our ad, he felt as though the roof had been lifted off the jail. One of our Calling/Caring Ministers is also in touch with him now. He's since been moved to a facility in Denver, but I received a card from him last week, in which he wrote this not just to me, but to all of you as well: "To Plymouth Congregational Church, Your light was my beacon, your compassion my warmth, your fellowship my hope." For someone who said that he felt like he was being tossed in the middle of a stormy ocean, to find a beacon is dying and rising. And when he's released, I know that he'll find a welcome here at Plymouth.

The archetypal mythic pattern of dying and rising is also seen in the phoenix, who bursts into flames and is then regenerated from the ashes. All of us have moments when we burst into flames; it's the possibility of rising from the ashes that is tricky.

Jesus addresses this in saying, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." For early Christians and clearly for Paul, this might have meant, "don't fear the Romans who oppress and persecute you," but *what does it mean for you?* What is it that can kill the externals of your life, but cannot kill you at your core? That's a big question: what can kill the externals, but not kill you inside? However you answer that question, Jesus suggests that you don't need to be fearful about it. As long as your core, your innermost being, your soul, is intact, there is a possibility from rising from the ashes.

Frederick Buechner once said that we live in falsity when we live our lives from the outside in, rather than from the inside out. When we allow ourselves to be defined by the car we drive, rather than by the content of our character; when we care more about how our clothes, rather than caring about whether our neighbor even has clothing; when we let advertising tell us what we need and how to live a good life, rather than living as disciples of the great teacher...then we are living from the outside in.

We need to work on knowing when *it's okay to let go*. One of the things I admire about a lot of octogenarians is that they don't typically give a hoot what other people think. They've let go of that conceit. That's a piece that we all could try to release. We could let that die and be reborn to a new way of living.

Marcus Borg says that "Spirituality is about the process of being born again (and again and again). It is at the heart of the Christian life."¹ In healthy, active spiritual lives, we are continually dying and rising – as we get a fresh perspective, practice a new form of prayer, engage a new mission. Being born again requires that the death of the old self. And transformation is hard.

¹ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, p.120)

Normal, healthy growth is painful and good all at the same time. We've all done it. Listen to this poem by Billy Collins, the poet laureate of the United States. It's called "On Turning Ten."

The whole idea of it makes me feel
like I'm coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light—
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
By drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window
watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never fell so solemnly
against the side of my tree house,
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage
as it does today,
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.
This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.

Can't you just feel the newfound angst of being a ten-year-old boy? Even when we turn ten...or twenty...or fifty...or eighty, *we still miss what it felt like* before that new self was born. I feel a certain melancholy when I think of life in my twenties when I had few responsibilities and lots of open doors, when Jean and I would take off for a weekend at a B&B in Point Reyes. But, I also feel the thrill of having kids and entering ordained ministry in my 30s and 40s. Most of us have moments when we long for "the good old days," whether that's a time when we had fewer family responsibilities, or when gasoline was only a buck a gallon, or when Fred was at Plymouth, or before 9/11, when terrorism and fear became our national preoccupation. And it's okay and normal to miss those times – we just can't get stuck there. *It's okay to let go.*

We need to learn to be okay with the process of dying and rising, to trust that God is with us in the midst of it all. I'm not always good at that because I like to be in control, but I'm trying hard to listen when God whispers, "It's okay to let go."

What are your deepest fears? Is it going broke? that war will continue? losing your spouse? public speaking? declining health? Whatever our deepest fears – even the fear of death itself – God is with us to meet those fears head-on and lead us into a new way of being. And when we listen to God's whisper and let go, then we move into new life, real life. *It's okay to let go.*

Amen.