

Sermon for January 29, 2017: If you love something, set it free

Commitment can make you do strange things. As someone who performs premarital counseling, I have had the opportunity to hear several unique and very strange promises couples have made to each other prior to getting married, including not to root against each other's sports teams, not to buy one another body fat scales, and, in my own case, making my husband promise to allow me to die first. There was *some* logic to this demand -having watched my mother widowed twice, I had a clear sense of the kind of fortitude it takes to move forward when you have lost someone who is as much a part of you as your own heart, and I doubted I was capable of it and had no desire to find out. Still, he might have been put off by this request. It is, after all, just a tiny bit morbid. But Gary, not missing a beat said, "Sure. No problem – because I plan to stuff you and put you in a rocking chair when you die anyway."

Which may explain why our relationship works. Our relationship fears are compatible. This may seem like a strange measure for the potential success of a marriage – and not one you often hear in pre-nuptial counseling - but as a psychologist, I can tell you with complete confidence that there is no such thing as a completely healthy relationship, and sometimes the best you can do is to be aware of your own neuroses, and work through them together. We are all afraid of something – and we are all flawed. *No one* on this earth leads a blameless life and

does what is right –does no evil to his friend –gives money without the hope of gain, and swears to do no wrong and is able to keep his word. No one.

Which makes me wonder why there are so many scripture readings that seem to suggest that that kind of perfection is exactly what God wants from us. The answer is that *God* doesn't. Notice that the laundry list of goodness we heard in today's psalm does not end with a promise that if we do these things *we* shall not be overthrown. It ends with the statement, "*Whoever* does these things shall never be overthrown," the "whoever" in this case, being God alone.

It does feel like a bit of a tease though – because it certainly *seems* like God is presenting us with some pretty clear directives for how we should live our lives - so it only makes sense that we would adopt these as goals and assume they are achievable. Except there's nothing in the Bible that supports that assumption. The truth is that *we* are the ones who have decided that if we try hard enough we can actually rise to this standard. *We* are the ones who seek perfection – who deny our fallibility - who chain ourselves to a perpetually-turning wheel of desire, expectation, and inevitable disappointment when we find we cannot achieve what we set out to do. We are the ones who set ourselves up for the frustration that comes when we think things are unfair.

The other day my son couldn't find his bicycle. It turned out he had left it in a bike locker at BART. When I berated him for not keeping track of his bike, he

told me it was his father's fault because Gary had unexpectedly offered to give Nick a ride home from school, thus making Nick forget he took his bike in the morning. Back in approximately 700 BCE, the people of Judah demonstrated a similar logic, asking God how he could possibly be angry with them when they had been sacrificing their best livestock to him for years without him even asking them too. "They thought that religion consisted of worshiping 'correctly' and staying away from those who didn't."¹ Seven hundred years later the Corinthians demonstrated that didn't know any better by assuming that deciding which Christian leader they should follow was the best way to get worship "right."

The crowds following Jesus had a simpler motive. They wanted to know what he could do for them – and what he wanted in return. But the series of statements that Jesus made to them – what we have come to know as "the beatitudes" – turned out not to be the prescription for how to live that they were looking for. Instead, they were a *description* of the realities of human life. What Jesus told the crowds was not *how* to be blessed, but instead that blessing was not something they could acquire –that it is a gift. "Blessed," Jesus told them, is not something you strive to be. "Blessed" is something you already are.

¹Brett Younger (2010), in Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration (Advent IV), David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. [Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation], 295.

That makes blessing is not a challenge but a promise – a promise that whatever state we are in, whatever our circumstances, God remains the source of our life and the one thing on which we can depend. It is a deeply comforting idea - and one that I still struggle intensely against. That's because accepting it – truly *believing* that there is nothing I can do to attain piety – to *achieve* sanctity – to *prove my worthiness* – means I am not in control of my life and, even more frightening, it means that all that I have gained through my own efforts - whatever knowledge, power, or strength I possess – have no part in my salvation.

There is a saying, "If you love someone, set them free. If they come back they're yours; if they don't they never were." I've always hated that saying – because I don't want to let go of the things I love. I don't want to risk losing them. I want to hang on to them with both hands. And yet I know from tragic experience that love which suffocates kills as surely as that which neglects.

True love – godly love - is not safe. It is not *tame*. Real love challenges us. It helps us to grow, to learn, to evolve. And while it is true that much that is worth having cannot be achieved, it is also true that many things can be accomplished – and that we attain much more when we work together. That requires allowing those around us the opportunity to seek wisdom on their terms, to take risks, to make mistakes - and to live without fear- and that includes the fears we project unto them.

It is hard to fight the fears we have for those with whom we are in relationship – harder perhaps than confronting that which we fear for ourselves. I admit that I fear many things. I fear that when my daughter leaves home to live on her own, she will not be ready. I fear that when my son attends a protest in downtown Oakland he will not be safe. I fear that when my mother drives herself from Connecticut to Pennsylvania her weakened heart will not be strong. And I fear for the people of St. Mary's. I fear that instead of the self-awareness, spiritual connections, and compassion you have gained through the challenges of this last year, it is the sorrow you have endured, the divisions you have suffered and the desire to forge ahead that you will take from this interim time – and from your relationship with me. I fear to leave you until I am sure *you* are ready, that you are safe, that you are strong.

But that fear, like the belief that anything we have achieved together is a result of our own strengths, is an illusion, based on pride. The truth is that I we can set one another free without fear. In relationship with one another and out, we are in God's hands– and, whatever we become, we are already all we need to be. Blessed are you, children of God. May you continue to hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you are already filled. AMEN.