

“Life Let Go”

Lent 5b-18

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

John 12:20-33

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“Life Let Go”

Have you ever heard of a monkey trap? I remember so offended when I learned of them back in elementary school... so offended at the notion that these traps could possibly catch a monkey. ‘Cause as a child, I loved monkeys. Well... I later learned that I really loved apes— chimps and orangutans and gorillas. But monkeys too. In part, I loved them because they’re so familial... they’re such social creatures. And I was fascinated by how smart they are, able to learn sign language and communicate their wants and emotions to humans. So when I first heard about these monkey traps, I thought, “There’s just no way... there’s no way a monkey would let itself get trapped like that.” I knew they were too smart for that.

You see, hunters and farmers have long known that to catch a monkey, all you need is a heavy, staked container with a hole in the top of it just wide enough for the monkey to stick its empty hand through. Once you stake the container down, you fill it with some sort of bate, like fruit or nuts. When the monkey smells it, it approaches the container, puts its hand through the small opening, grabs the bate... and tries to then pull its hand out holding onto the bate. But because the opening is just barely big enough for the monkey’s empty hand to go in... it’s not big enough for a clinched fist holding something to come out.

Now... here’s the offensive part. You’d think that the monkey would eventually figure this thing out. All it has to do is let go of the bate, and it’s free. It simply has to unclench its fist so that it can pull its hand out of the container. But the monkeys never do. They’re just not willing to let go of the bate... as they just stay there, stuck in their self-made prison.

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Well... as a kid I took some convincing that monkeys were actually dumb enough to fall for that trap. But I’m here to tell you... it’s not just monkeys that fall for it.

This past Thanksgiving, the Carters added Carson, a furry little member to our family. And (we keep the little guy’s treats in this ceramic container) this is what we keep the little guy’s treats in. Now, when the treats are filled up to the top of the canister, I can just reach in with my fingers and grab one. No problem. But when about half of them are gone and I have to reach my hand farther down to grab a treat... Well... let’s just say you’d think... you’d *think* that a man in his 40’s with a master’s degree and the title Reverend associated with his profession would be smart enough not to keep on making the same mistake. You’d think that, wouldn’t you? But you’d be wrong!

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Of course, monkey traps aren’t always physical.

When I was 23, I spent the summer between my first and second years of seminary working as a hospital chaplain in Camden, NJ. It was part of a Clinical Pastoral Education

program all PCUSA pastors must complete. It's an immersive chaplaincy experience designed to give future pastors an intense, hands-on season to practice their pastoral care skills, while learning more about themselves.

But I didn't want to do it. For starters, I wasn't keen on working 50 hour weeks for free all summer. But more than that, I didn't think I *needed* to do it. So I went to my presbytery explaining, "Look. I already have experience as a counselor... Over a year's worth. So it's not like I'm gonna learn anything new in this 12 week program. So please... don't make me do this."

They listened to me, and said, "Nice try, Rob. You're doing it"

So I did it. I joined a group of other seminary students amid this chaplaincy program for the summer. While the others in my unit were scared as our internship began... I was just frustrated I had to be there. So when the others worried about how they would talk to patients... what they'd say to families in grief and shock... how to approach someone they knew didn't have much longer for this world... I was really just looking at the calendar and ticking the days off, one by one.

Don't get me wrong, though. I did the work. I visited my patients. And I cared about them. I applied all the listening and interviewing skills I'd learned throughout college and my previous experiences. And to be honest, I thought I was rockin' it.

Then about half-way through the summer... in one of our group settings—when all the summer interns gather with the supervisor for a sort of intensive group therapy session—our supervisor turned to me and said, "Carter, you want to be me, don't you?"

I didn't know what the heck he meant. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean... you want to be me. You don't want to be a participant in this group... you want to be the one leading the group. Just like you don't want to be the chaplain visiting the patients... you want to be the supervisor overseeing the chaplains."

"I don't mind being a chaplain," I said defensively.

"Oh, sure you do, Carter. You don't want to be a chaplain, just like you don't want to be in this program. Because you think you don't need to be."

Now, I'd never told him that, but I knew he was right. It was pointless to argue. So I just sat there, unsure of how to respond.

Then he said, "You know, Carter, I'll hand it to you. You're smart. You know you're stuff. You really do. You may be one of the best counselors who's ever come through this program. But you still don't have the foggiest idea of how to be a chaplain."

He explained, "You know how to listen...how to probe... how to be present in tough situations... all things a good counselor does. But that's only part of what a chaplain must do. So you've gotta decide, Carter... are you ever gonna take your hand out of the monkey trap and embrace your call to the church."

He was right. He had me pegged. My resistance to that summer internship wasn't that I didn't need to do it. Rather, I didn't want to make the shift that internship required of me. I didn't want to let go of my counseling identity... I didn't want to fully let go of the dream I had

of becoming a clinical psychologist... I didn't want to release my past aspirations in order to embrace the new call I was exploring.

My hand was in that monkey trap... clinging to the past... so I went into those patients' rooms as a counselor rather than a chaplain. I went in there to listen and probe rather than share the peace of Christ and a word of prayer.

And it wasn't until I was finally able to let go... to intentionally let go of my counseling goals and my past identity as a counselor... that I then... for the first time... finally found a sense of peace amid my journey back into the church and my call to the pastorate.

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In our gospel lesson this morning, people come seeking to meet Jesus. John doesn't tell us exactly why, but the implication is they're interested in becoming followers... disciples of this miracle man. So in response to would-be disciples, Jesus makes things clear. "In order to follow me, you must be willing to let go. In order to be my disciples, you must part with the identities and values of this world. You must let go of your own agendas... your own priorities... of your own obsessions and preoccupations... so that, with newly opened hands, you can take and use the gifts I give you as you pursue this thing called eternal life—the kingdom of God."

He explains it in imagery familiar back then, but not so common today—that of harvesting. "Just like a stalk of wheat must be willing to let go of its grain in order for the seed to fall the ground and germinate a new yield, so you must be willing to let go of the things you think you want... things you think you need... things you may have even been pursuing your whole life long... so that you can grasp the kingdom of God I've come to reveal."

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My CPE supervisor put it to me bluntly. I was clinging to something I needed to let go of. And gotta tell you... it was hard... it was hard to let go of the counseling identity I had spent years creating and honing within myself. It was hard to tell myself, "You're not a counselor anymore; you're going to be a pastor." But I also gotta tell you... I'm so glad I was able to let it go. 'Cause if I hadn't, I wouldn't be standing in a pulpit today. That's for sure.

But that's also not to say there aren't other facets of my life that still get caught in the trap... facets of my life that tend to get stuck in a prison of my own making. I notice them when I get too stingy to be generous. When I get too focused on my job and not focused enough on my family. Every time I fail to experience freedom and joy because I'm living into societal or familial or personal expectations, rather than the call of God in Jesus Christ.

But that's me. That's part of my story. How about you? Where are you stuck? And don't tell me you aren't because I guarantee... each and every one of us in this room has facets of our life that are stuck right now. Things in our lives that we refuse to let go of... values or goals or desires or expectations that hold us back from not just being a fan of Jesus Christ, but of being a full-throated follower. What do you need to let go of? What grudge? What goal? What part of your life is trapped right now because you're so busy clinging to the past or some goal for the future that you're unable to grab hold of the kingdom Jesus has come offering?

It's a pivotal Lenten question... What do you need to let go of, in order to more faithfully follow Christ? He who gave every ounce of himself, so that we might know eternal life—life as God intends it—not just in heaven... but even here and now?

Dare we find the faith to actually let go of our own agendas in order to see what God intends? Dare we even do so in the church? Dare we stop clinging to programs of the past... models of the past that can hinder the ministry of tomorrow to which God makes possible? Dare we venture to wonder what church school might look like in 5 years? Dare we venture to think beyond our current Sunday morning worship and church school schedule to picture a path that embraces more people and offers more opportunities for our young people to worship with us for an entire service? Dare we let go of previous church model that say the church's mission and outreach is the work of the staff... so that we can begin to uncover the life and breath of the Spirit calling one and all to share in the church's mission and outreach? Do we dare let? Do we dare find the faith to let go of what needs to be released in order to grab hold of the kingdom of God?

The truth is, I don't know what God has planned for us. I'm not sure of what God has planned for me, for you, or for us in the next five years... but I do know... I do know we'll never reach for it if we're clinging to something else.

As Jesus makes clear, the only way to find the life God intends for us, is to let go of the agendas and expectations of this world, in order to embrace both the gifts and the call God sets before us here and now. Amen.