Book 8

Sunday November 5, 1978

"LETTING GO" Matthew 6:19-21, 16:24-26

Letting go is one of the universal experiences. From birth to death, we face a continuous series of partings. How well we handle such leave-taking determines to a large extent whether we are happy or unhappy, integrated or fragmented.

Letting go is a part of our continued growth and maturing. As we move through life, there are many things and people and events which we need to "let go." The process of letting go can be painful. Sometimes we cling to relationships longer than we should. We are sometimes upset when people "let go" of us. Our resistance to change sometimes compels us to maintain associations or ideas or ways of seeing the world that we should have outgrown and let go. Our need for security makes us hang onto things we should let go.

Actually, all of human life is a process of both acquisition and relinquishment. Our problem is that most of us are much better, more skillful, give more emphasis to acquisition than to letting go. Few of us have the attitude and serenity of Job, who said after losing his sons and daughters, and his herds and flocks, and all of his possessions--"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Job's quotation is particularly appropiate because the kind of letting go we are talking about in this sermon is not always giving up the things of the world, but it is accepting the fact that they go away. Nothing is eternal except God. Letting go is an attitude as well as an action. It is an attitude of allowing, of non-attachment. Letting go means relaxing the grasping hand. It is to not give eternal value to things which are not eternal.

That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal."

Letting go involves being careful with what we give eternal value.

Jesus Christ continually came into contact with persons who could not let go.

Not being able to let go when necessary or as a regular part of life can have disastrous consequences. A child screams and becomes hysterical during the first day at school. A young man breaks up with his girl friend and become impotent. A young woman breaks up with her boy friend and has difficulty establishing new relationships. A wife who moves with her husband to a new job location begins to drink heavily and picks up men at a nearby bar. A mother whose children have left home eats herself into obesity. A formerly healthy man, suffering a mild heart attack, goes into a severe and pro-longed depression. A daughter whose mother has died erupts into a period of guilt, depression and rage. Letting go is difficult.

We cling to people, to the past, to outmoded ideas and to the possessions we have acquired. A 22 year old comes home. He has graduated from college. He has traveled the country on his own. It is time for him to get a job. On his first night at home, he buys five model airplanes at a hobby shop and for the next several days occupies himself with an activity he last engaged in at the age of twelve. His parent's reaction: he is lazy, he is stalling. The boy wants to grow. He knows it is expected of him. But he finds it very difficult to take leave of his whole life up to now.

There comes a time when we need to let go of our childhood; let go of our parents, and our parents let go of us; times come when we have to let go of jobs; let go of friends; let go of objects; let go of money; let go of our first love affair. There are other kinds of letting go as well. Sometimes part of our health fails. We may lose our eye-sight, or our hearing, or part of it; or lose an arm or the use of another part of our body. And there is the ultimate letting go of this life--in death.

Letting go cannot be avoided, but it can be handled and dealt with in creative ways--in ways that lead to continued growth and maturity.

To further understand the process of letting go and its importance, let's look now at a particular kind of letting go--in fact the highest form of letting go--willingly giving. Even more specifically, let's talk about the

letting go, the giving of our money and some of our false ideas about money. That we all let go of our money, we know. But do we do it in the right and responsible way?

In the list of the traditional seven deadly sins, the second sin is known as avarice or greed. Probably we do not think of ourselves as being particularly greedy or stingy. We think of the miser as being that way--someone who cannot let go of his or her money. We have enough trouble holding on to our money. When we picture a miser, we think of a person putting his or her arms around a pile of money on a table, embracing it and running his or her hands through it.

The miser is making an idol of the money. He has set it up as a god. Idolatry is self-abasement before an object that is unworthy of our veneration and it always diminishes us in the process. When we worship God who is worthy of our worship, then we are enhanced and grow in the process.

Most of us are not like the traditional miser, all shut away in secret, counting and fondling his or her money; always afraid that it is going to be lost.

In our times we are different. Our love of possessing is out in the open, on view to everyone, many times flaunted in their faces. Instead of just counting our money, we are at least spending it. Surely we tell ourselves, we cannot be thought of as being greedy or being a miser when we spend so much. Scrooge gave nothing to anyone at Christmas; we go on an orgy of spending. Are we not different? Maybe we are not so different as we think. We have the love of possessing. To buy what we do not need; more even than we need for our pleasure and our entertainment is a love of possessing for its own sake.

We may think we do not know any misers since we do not come across people fondling their coins and letting them trickle through their fingers, but we all know people whose homes are filled with possessions so that literally there is no room to turn in them.

Can anyone really need so much, or derive pleasure from them? There are people and we may be among them, who do not love their possessions for what they are--no one can love so many objects--but we may love only the fact that we possess them. Possessing can give us a kind of super-

iority, or status and we hope to find our security in that.

More and more in our culture and economy we are encouraged to buy and possess, not because of need, not even for our pleasure, but simply for the sake of possessing. We buy more clothes than we need, more accessories (how revealing that word is) than we need, more furniture than we need, more things to play with than we need, more bric-a-brac than we need, more cookbooks than we need, and even more gifts for our friends and our children than they need.

We have learned to let go of our money, but mostly in trade for other objects we can possess and hold on to. People complain about having to work in ways which are not satisfying, but they do so often so that they can buy things which they believe are necessary to satisfy them. At the same time they talk and complain about the increased tempo of life which is in itself caused in part by the sin of avarice or greed in themselves, by their desire to possess more and more.

Then as spending outstrips income they feel and proclaim that they are underpaid, defeated by inflation and taxes and incapable of affording their family's needs. What has happened to many people is that yesterday's luxuries have become today's necessities, leading people to feel that their needs are always slightly greater than their income.

Because money and inflation are on our minds so much these days and in the news, we can easily become afflicted with a disease which one magazine article called the disease of "poor talk." It's highly contagious, perhaps because people enjoy having it. Moreover, once it starts to spread, people quickly try to one-up each other to see who has it the worst. The ailment contaminates people at all levels of income and education--college faculty, union workers, business executives.

Some of the symptoms of the disease are continual complaints that one cannot make ends meet and grousing about rising costs and finding bittersweet pleasure in itemizing what one cannot afford. Another symptom is bemoaning the cost of trivial items while continuing to spend on large items.

Do you mind if I meddle a little more this morning? It can be humorous listening to much of the poor-talk if you pay close attention. I overheard a person saying that he was going to have to cut his pledge to the church this coming year because of a change in jobs--but of course he is going to pay the increase in his country club dues without question.

Another person complained that his family cannot even make a pledge to the church, but the family has just bought a new and larger sail boat than the one they had. I noted in the Wall Street Journal a few weeks ago that the cost of skiing is going to be a lot higher this winter. So I wanted to laugh out loud when I overheard some people discussing about how short of money they were and the awfulness of inflation and then in the next breath they mentioned they were going to be taking two ski trips this year instead of one.

Not long ago someone else was describing to me the new four-wheet drive vehicle his family had just purchased. I wanted to ask, but didn't, about his church pledge.

Although the disease of poor talk is understandable, it is nevertheless debilitating. First, it makes us feel worse about our plight than is necessary. We seem to enjoy complaining and commiserating; yet the very act of complaining increases our unhappiness.

Second, poor-talk focuses our attention on ourselves, thus blinding us to the genuine needs of those who lack the basic necessities of life: clean water, adequate nutrition, and a roof over their heads.

And third, much or at least some of our poor-talk is dishonest. Have you met any of our members who do not have enough food to eat or clothes to wear? Have you noticed very many people, yourselves included, driving fewer miles because the price of gasoline has almost doubled? Do you know of anyone who has quit smoking or drinking because he or she couldn't afford it?

Yet there are those among us who when asked to pledge to the church or increase their pledge do so in a grudging fashion or do not do so at all, as if their whole budget were going to be wrecked because of their letting go and giving willingly and joyfully.

What we forget in this matter of acquiring and letting go is that there are equations as true in the spiritual world as in the field of mathematics. Jesus said, "Whoever would save his life, whoever tries to just hang onto things and never let go, will lose his or her life, but whoever loses his or her life, whoever lets go and gives, not only money, but gives himself or herself to commitment with God--that person will find his or her life."

The Christian faith makes us an incredible promise in this whole business of letting go, of giving willingly. If you will willingly and cheerfully give, your whole life will begin to change for the better. The highest form of letting go is giving.

So this week when your pledge card is delivered to you through the mail by the Pony Express Route Rider, consider how much of an increase you are going to joyfully give for the work of the church. Say to yourself for a change, "I'm going to put God first in my life and as partial evidence of this, I'm going to set aside %5 or 10% of my income and let go of it willingly.

Many people are anxious and worried these days. There are those who eat and sleep too much as a compensation for it. Some use their work as a refuge from their anxiousness, and others try to find security in possessions and pleasure. None of these solutions are adequate and are what we really want, and sooner or later we find it out. Life is for too many people a series of experiments to get away from themselves, to resolve their basic anxiety.

The people who come nearest to resolving the conflict are the people with genuine religious faith. The greatest need is for some satisfying center around which to gather the many fragmentary elements of our emotions and our lives. Then letting go is never as difficult.

If anything can bring order and meaning to our lives--if anything can hitch these numerous ribs to some coordinating spine==it must be something which has immense power and yet which draws rather than drives us to accept its authority. Nothing else but God can do this. Nothing else but God is big enough to challenge the overwhelming claims which we make for ourselves. Nowhere else is there enough power to draw from us the intense love which is ordinarily poured out upon ourselves. This week, this morning, let go and give yourself to God. Amen.