Sunday, May 1, 1994
JOURNEY TO JOY (No. 3 in a Series: Letting Go)
Matthew 6:19-21, 11:28-30

Last week I heard a story about a truck and its cargo. Every time the truck came to an intersection, the driver would get out and beat on the side of the truck with a big stick. Finally, someone who had been following him and watching this strange behavior got out of his car at the next intersection and asked the truck driver what was going on. The driver said that his truck was only supposed to carry a load of two tons, but he had in the back four tons of birds, so every time he had the chance, he would stop and beat on the side of the truck so that at least half of the birds would stay in the air.

Some people's lives are like that. Many of you are out there beating yourself, trying to keep it all in the air, trying to keep it from all crashing down. Or to use another metaphor, we have a tendency to get stuck in life, mired down. We get stuck in relationships. We get stuck in habits. We get stuck in grief when we lose a loved one. We get stuck in false values. We get stuck in denial. We get stuck in our worries. We get stuck in our fears. We get stuck in holding grudges and resentments because we refuse to be forgiving. We get stuck in anger. We get stuck in our work. We get stuck in holding on to things that we should've gotten rid of. In other words, we get stuck with a lot of excess baggage that we need to let go.

How do you break out of being stuck and get going again? That's what this sermon series is all about. Step one is to admit that you are stuck, that you've got some habits, some hurts, some hangups, some difficulties that you can't deal with. That's the reality step. I admit that I've got a problem. I admit that I am lost and that I am powerless to change it all by myself.

Step two is to recognize and believe that there is a power — God — ready and willing to help. Last week, in the second sermon in this series, we talked about how to find help for your hurt, about how to come to know and trust God. As I said last week, the real issue for most people is not, is there a God? The real issue is, how can I come to know and trust God?

In that sermon, I noted that there is no one way to come to know and trust God that works for everyone. Some people have to experience a taste of being in hell in this life, have to hit bottom before they are open to God's power and help. Others, on the other hand, seem to be born with a knowledge and trust of God. For them, it's the natural thing to do. Still, others come to know and trust God gradually over a period of years, in the same way, they come to know and trust other people close to them. One of the best ways to come to know and trust God is through the life, teachings, and example of Jesus.

Here's what Jesus had to say about it: "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

That's quite an invitation. Why would anyone refuse it? Yet many people have heard that invitation and have not acted on it. What keeps us from taking this third step? What keeps you from delaying your response to this invitation? What keeps you from letting go of your many problems and pains and beginning the process of trusting God to take care of them?

One of the reasons we have difficulty letting go of our problems and pains is our pride. That's what the first sermon in this series was mostly about. We do not want to admit we need help. We do not want to admit that we cannot handle all our problems all by ourselves.

A second major reason we have trouble letting go and trusting God is that we're afraid of what we might have to give up. We forget that "letting go" is a universal experience. 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, and most important of all, whether or not we learn to trust God.

Letting go is a part of our continued growth and maturing. As we move through life, there are many things, people, and events we need to "let go."

The process of "letting go" can be painful. Therefore, sometimes we cling to relationships longer than we should. We are sometimes upset when people let go of us. Our resistance to change frequently compels us to maintain associations, ideas, or ways of seeing the world that we should have outgrown and let go of. Our need for security makes us hang onto things we should let go of. In other words, we're afraid to let go and trust God.

Throughout this sermon series, we are using the metaphor of life as a journey, and every journey implies that as we move ahead, we need to leave some things behind. And that can be painful. But beyond the pain, there can be joy.

Yet because of the pain of leaving some things behind, many people stop their journey before they get to joy. They find what looks like a safe place, burrow into the sand, and stay there rather than go forward. They may avoid some pain but never experience the journey to joy.

For example, new research on aging shows that senility is not only a biological disorder. It can also be a manifestation of a refusal to grow up, a psychological disorder preventable by anyone who embarks on a lifetime pattern of psycho-spiritual growth. Those who stop learning and growing early in their lives and stop changing and become fixed often lapse into what is sometimes called their "second childhood." They become whiny and demanding and self-centered. But this isn't because they have entered their second childhood. They have never let go of their first, and the veneer of adulthood is worn thin, revealing the emotional child that lurks underneath.

We forget that all of human life is a process of both acquisition and relinquishment. Every journey implies leaving some things behind. It involves letting go and trusting God.

The problem in our culture is that most of us are much better, more skillful, and give more emphasis to acquisition than to letting go or giving away. Most of what we are taught in life is how to get things — how to make friends and influence people, how to hold onto things. Thus, most of us are much better and more skillful in acquisition than we are in letting go or giving things away.

Relinquishment is relaxing the grasping hand. It means being less possessive, not giving eternal value to the things we own, the people we know, the plans we have, and the successes or failures we collect. All things go away. Nothing is eternal except God. That's why Jesus 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. For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also."

We need 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." Until we learn how to let go, we will have difficulty in trusting God.

The amazing thing is, we even have trouble letting go of hurts and resentments. We hang onto our grudges as if they were the most precious items in the world. Therefore, the journey to joy is frequently blocked by our unwillingness to grant forgiveness to those who have hurt us.

In his book, Further Along the Road Less Traveled, Dr. M. Scott Peck tells about a patient of his whose parents had put him through hell as a child. He was having difficulty forgiving them. He said to Peck, "I could forgive them if I could go to them and tell them the ways they've hurt me, and they would apologize or even if they would just listen. But if I go and tell them how they'd hurt me, they'd say I was only making these things up. They'd refuse to even remember what they have done. I'm the one who has had all of the pain. They gave me all the pain. They haven't had any of it, but you're expecting me to forgive them?"

And Peck said, "Yes." Peck had to explain to his patient that forgiveness was necessary for the young man's healing, painful though it is. Such people are going to stay fouled up until they can forgive their parents, whether or not their parents apologize or even listen.

According to Peck, sometimes some of his patients ask him, "Why do we have to talk about all this bad stuff from the past? We're always talking about all the bad things my parents did, and that's really unfair to them. They did some good things too. This is unbalanced."

He usually answers this way: "Obviously your parents did some good things. For one thing, you're alive, and you wouldn't be alive unless they did something right. But the reason that we focus on the bad stuff is because of Sutton's law."

"What is Sutton's law?" the patient usually asks.

"It's a law named after Willie Sutton, who was a famous bank robber. When Sutton was asked by a reporter why he robbed banks, he said, 'Because that's where the money is.'"

In dealing with "letting go," we focus on the bad things, the resentments, the hurts, the pain because that's where the big payoff is. That's where the wounds and the scars are. Those are the areas that need healing.

If we're going to grow in our trust of God, we need to let go of those pains and hurts. We need to come to terms with them. Therefore, in the process of forgiveness, the chief reason for forgiveness is selfish. The reason to forgive others is not for their sake. They are not likely to know that they need to be forgiven. Many won't even remember their offense. They are likely to say, "You just made it up." They may even be dead. The reason to forgive is for your own sake, for your own health. Unless we can forgive, let go of our hurts, we hinder our trust in God. Forgiveness is an action we need to take in order for our trust in God to grow.

Let me explain further. Last week, when I talked about the step of coming to know and trust God, I was talking about the decision to take that step. Today we are talking about some of the ways to go about doing that.

Too many times, we confuse the decision-making step with the problem-solving step. Back in 1963, when President Kennedy said, “We’re going to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade,” that was the decision. Had all the problems been solved when he made that decision? No, of course not. The next step was to begin to solve the problem of how to do that. The basic decision had to be made before we could begin to work on solving the problem.

You can make the decision to trust God — a very important decision. The step we’re talking about today is how to begin doing that — the process. But if you wait to try to solve all the problems before you make the decision, you’ll never make the decision.

The Christian life is a decision followed by a process. The road to joy is a decision followed by a process. Two weeks ago, the members of the 9th-grade confirmation class made a decision to follow the way of Jesus. Now the process begins. You can never get all your questions answered before you make the decision.

And for each one of us, no matter when we made the decision to follow the way of Jesus, the process of knowing and deepening our trust in God continues throughout our lives. A crucial step in that process is letting go, leaving behind our excess baggage.

So today, ask yourself, “What are some of the things I need to let go of and then trust God? Who are some of the people I need to forgive? What are some of the burdens that I’m carrying that I need to lay down so that I can continue my journey to joy?” Remember the invitation of Jesus, “Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Amen.