

“Let it Go”

December 29, 2019

The Rev. Heather Janules

(A ritual of “releasing” words and images, written on flash paper in a candle flame, came immediately after this reflection. The preparation for the ritual is written into the end of the sermon.)

We gather this morning at the very end of the season many call “the holidays.” As we have named throughout the month of December, this is a time of familiar rituals – the singing of carols, the kindling of lights, the telling of ancient stories.

And, as part of my ministry in this season, I have followed my own yearly rituals – reviewing the readings from past Christmas Eve services, searching for new poems and prayers that speak to this time, participating in our holiday gatherings, such as the Greening Party and caroling in Downtown Winchester.

And, because “the holidays” are often celebrated with family, with so many members of the congregation reconnecting with parents and siblings, I have practiced another ritual this month: freely sharing one of my favorite quotes. I first heard the saying from the writer Mary Karr but it has been attributed to others as well. Wisdom has a way of transcending one author as it belongs to all of us.

This is the time of year when I remind us that, as Karr and others have said, “our family pushes our buttons because they sewed them on.”

I have seen many in the congregation delighting in reunion with loved ones during “the holidays,” especially young adult children back home from college or their new lives in other cities. It is almost cliché to talk about family gatherings as stressful or upsetting. And, yet, hearing from

some of you in the healing professions, such as therapy and psychiatry, your busy work schedules this month reflect the real pain people feel when they revisit old hurts just by being in the presence of family or when they struggle in current conflicts. During the holidays, it is not always easy to feel happy or merry when among relatives.

“Our family pushes our buttons because they sewed them on.” These words remind me of a worship service I attended long ago. My minister led us through an exercise, asking us to raise our hand if we have ever broken a bone in the past. Most of us in the pews put a hand in the air. She then asked us to keep our hands up if that injury still hurt. All but a few hands came down.

Rev. Kim then asked us to raise our hands if someone said something that hurt us in the past year...and to keep our hands up if remembering these words still caused pain. Many hands stayed in the air. She then walked us back in time: “Raise your hand if someone said something that hurt you five years ago...ten years ago...when you were a child.” By then, most of us had our hands up. She paused and invited us to look around at our wordless testimony to the power of human emotions and one of the most difficult things about memory. Whether we forgive those who hurt us or not, either way we often do not forget.

Sitting there with my hand high in the air, I couldn't help but think of the childhood saying about “sticks and stones.” Unkind names and deeds do hurt us; we learn the “sticks and stones” chant perhaps to convince us otherwise but all those raised hands made it clear how much we carry with us from the past.

“Let it go.” Writer Brian Doyle hears these words at a time when he was, as he recalls, “in tears, furious, frightened, exhausted, as drained and hopeless as I have ever been in this bruised and blessed world, at the very end of the end of my rope.” Like the exercise of raising our

hands, I assume that if we are not in this state right now, we have been there before and can remember what this feels like.

Who told Brian Doyle to “let it go?” The source of the voice he heard is not important to me although it is important to him. What is most important to me is that he heard it at all, that the idea of releasing himself from his despair broke through the vicious storm within. And the end result of seeking this freedom was a transformation so powerful it was ineffable. “Something broke and something healed,” Doyle affirms, “Something so deep and joyous that I cannot find words for it, hard as I try.” We remember old hurts and pain but we can recall moments of healing and grace, too. The blessing of human memory.

December is winding down and the remains of 2019 slip through our fingers. Thus we approach one of the last rituals of the holiday season – reflecting on how we live our lives and how we seek to change. With so few days remaining in this year, we are invited to consider what we want to set down on this page of the calendar before it turns to the New Year. We are invited to imagine how we want to become “broken and healed” ourselves in the seasons ahead. We are invited to consider what we want to release, to let go of, on the threshold of the future that waits for us.

“Letting go” is a practice akin to forgiveness. When we “let go” of a grudge or a hurt or a bad experience, we grant ourselves greater freedom and peace. For, in the immortal words of advice columnist Ann Landers, “hanging onto resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head.”¹

Yet, I am wary of pointing towards forgiveness as if we are morally obligated to seek it as a goal. Forgiveness is a great commandment of

¹ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/josephbernstein/living-in-your-head-rent-free-is-the-perfect-insult-of-our>

many of the world's religions but if you have ever considered forgiving someone who has done great harm, you know the work of forgiveness is easier said than done.

Some of the life experiences people share with therapists and psychiatrists cannot be forgiven or forgotten. I recall reading a reflection by a woman whose daughter died by homicide. Speaking of the man eventually convicted of her murder, she said, "Forgiveness is something I hope to walk towards someday." I don't know if this is how she felt but I heard in her words the conviction that actively seeking forgiveness for the one who robbed her beloved daughter of life and caused tremendous suffering would insult her daughter's memory. Sometimes holding on and not forgiving is one way we love ourselves and continue to love those we care about most.

However Brian Doyle heard the words "let it go," no matter whether we choose to set aside our resentments or not, I find meaning in the truth that, in all times and all seasons, we have a choice. The only people we can control are ourselves but within this limited sphere of agency, so much is possible.

Rev. Kim once told a story about our freedom to choose how we manage the pain we carry. It may have been in the same service when she asked us about our old physical and emotional wounds. She writes:

I once worked with someone who fought bitterly with her mother every time they were on the phone. Without fail, my co-worker would be awash in day-ruining emotions after their telephone interactions. The plan, then, was that she would make a little sign for her phone. It said, "Don't dial pain." That's the plan: not to repeat the same mistake, but, instead, to make new ones.²

² http://www.ascboston.org/downloads/publications/Sermons/Sermon_090920.pdf

Kim went on to say we could make a fortune selling these little signs as many of us need them throughout our homes - on our mirrors, our refrigerators, on our liquor bottles. I would add that the times we live in warrant another place for these signs, on our social media pages. "Don't dial pain."

I recently read another version of these "don't dial pain" signs, written specifically for the holiday season. It may be too late to share these "holiday rules" now but we can keep them in mind for next year:

Do not go into debt trying to show people how much you love them

Do not go home to see family if it damages your mental health

If someone comments on your weight, eat them ³

That last suggestion is unrealistic...but you get the idea.

If you haven't noticed, I have a small tattoo on my right wrist. In case you are wondering, with so many Gen X and Millennial ministers, having a minister with a tattoo is not unusual.

The tattoo is the Chinese character for "letting go." I feel a little strange, having a word from another culture on my body. But there is a story behind it.

A friend had this tattoo before me. When I asked her what it meant and she told me, I replied "You have 'letting go' permanently tattooed on your flesh?" She said that in the twenty years of having this tattoo, no one had made this observation before.

³ <https://me.me/i/positiveoutlooks-holiday-rules-1-do-not-go-into-debt-trying-092a59c51c2d47cba4ba0bee256413ba>

This irony, of having a reminder to “let go” with me at all times, in a way I can never let go of, inspired me to get the same tattoo. For it is human nature to hold on to things; sometimes – if not the voice of the Mother – along with signs reading “don’t dial pain,” we need a sign telling us we should “let it go.”

My tattoo became more meaningful to me when I met an acquaintance fluent in Chinese. With trepidation, I asked her to confirm the meaning of the character. To my relief, I learned it does mean “letting go” or, more specifically, “to move towards.” With this translation, I am reminded that sometimes we have to set down what we are carrying in order to fully live into our future. This choice is always available to us.

One highlight of my holiday season was not related to the holidays at all. I listened to an interview with Richard Schwartz, the father of Internal Family Systems Theory, by Jonathan Van Ness on his podcast, *Getting Curious*.⁴ If you are unfamiliar with Internal Family Systems Theory, it is worthy of its own sermon sometime.

In brief, the understanding at the heart of the theory is that “your family pushes your buttons because they sewed them on.” Our emotional reactions to life find their origins in the environments we were raised. If there is “a part of you” that is self-critical, it is likely that you grew up in the company of a critical person; your self-critical “part” is trying to protect you and keep you safe even though it causes problems in your current life. In the interview, Schwartz hypothesizes that our current president was raised among someone who “had contempt for vulnerability.” Sometimes we mock others before we ourselves can be mocked.

⁴ <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/earwolf/getting-curious-with-jonathan-van-ness/e/65921010>

In Internal Family Systems therapy, an individual is guided to pay attention to each “part” of their emotional palate, no matter how seemingly maladaptive they may be. Wisdom is learned from these “parts” and these emotional reactions are honored for trying to keep us safe. Having been recognized and allowed to teach their lessons, in time, each reactive part can relax and fade into the background, no longer needing to be on duty.

Schwartz says something incredible in the interview. He has worked with a number of individuals with horrific childhoods, people who are carrying heavy loads of pain. Through the IFS approach, in time the pain subsides and an integrated self emerges. We are all born with and have a centered self within, Schwartz affirms, defined by “the eight C’s”: compassion, curiosity, calm, clarity, courage, connectedness, confidence and creativity.⁵ Schwartz reminds us that these are qualities that often have spiritual meaning. When one embodies “the eight C’s,” they embody “Buddha nature” or “the Atman” in Hinduism or “Christ consciousness.” When we let our internal, protective forces go, an inner peace is possible; our buttons can be removed.

It is good that I have my tattoo, reminding me to “let go,” to “move towards” the future without a bundle of bad memories or someone living in my head rent free. Yet, on my best days, I find myself wavering between the familiar habit of nurturing resentments and choosing to change myself through setting down historic hurts. I often feel like humor writer David Sedaris who once said, “I haven't the slightest idea how to change people, but still I keep a long list of prospective candidates just in case I should ever figure it out.”⁶

But every now and then, an invitation comes to release what we are carrying. Brian Doyle received his invitation through hearing a

⁵ <https://www.cathyannsimmons.com/InternalFamilySystems.en.html>

⁶ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2849.David_Sedaris

commandment. This morning, we receive this invitation through a ritual.

In your order-of-service, there is a small piece of flash paper. The invitation begins with us asking a question: Is there something you wish to let go of this morning? It could be an old resentment or a current worry or struggle or one of the many challenges facing us as a nation or the world. What would do you choose to release?

Perhaps you are not ready to “let go” of something that weighs you down. That is okay; just hearing the invitation and remembering we always have a choice is part of the ritual.

If you have something to let go of, please write a phrase or draw a small image on the paper to represent what you are releasing. Let us now do this together in a minute of collective silence.

Whether your paper is blank or contains words or an image, please fold it in half. We are reaching the end of a year, the closing of a chapter.

Now hold your folded paper in your hand for one moment. Whether it is the lessons of 2019 or how what you are releasing has affected you, what you hold has been one of your teachers. I invite us into another moment of shared silence so we may extend gratitude for the gifts we have received, no matter how hard or strange they may be.

You are now invited to come forward in the ritual of letting go. If you would like a lit candle brought to you, please raise your hand.

Let us begin...