

The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey Lee  
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights  
 January 13, 2024

### Clinging & Letting Go

I don't watch a lot of television, but there is one show I have loved over the years — Grey's Anatomy, just beginning its 21st season! If you've ever seen it you might remember how many episodes begin the same way — these great voice overs they do while some medical drama is unfolding in the background on the screen. There is one episode that I have never forgotten. It began with a depiction of the frantic efforts of doctors and nurses to revive a patient who'd been brought suddenly into the Emergency Room - this is what we hear in the voice over:

"Change is literally the only constant in all of science. Energy. Matter. It's always changing, morphing, merging, growing, dying. It's the way people try *not* to change that's unnatural. The way we cling to what things were instead of letting things be what they are. The way we cling to old memories instead of forming new ones. The way we insist on believing, despite every scientific indication, that anything in this lifetime is permanent. Change is constant. How we experience change — that's up to us. It can feel like death or it can feel like a second chance at life. If we open our fingers, loosen our grips, go with it, it can feel like pure adrenaline. Like at any moment we can have another chance at life. Like at any moment, we can be born all over again."

It isn't the very real pain of the losses we endure in this life. It isn't our time-bound perception of change and death that's the problem - as the Buddhists insist, attachment is the source of all suffering. It's our clinging, our clutching, our inability or refusal to let go that keeps us bound, that fuels our despair, that obscures our experience of resurrection, that keeps us from living. Really living.

And it doesn't have to be just the agony of physical separation and death. It shows up in all kinds of ways. I love the story of a husband and wife having some argument about the same thing for the umpteenth time - some misdeed or other of his (always seems to be the way!) "I thought you said you had forgiven and forgotten about all that," he says to his wife. "I have forgiven and forgotten about it," she replies. "I just don't want you to forget that I've forgiven and forgotten about it."

It is all the stuff we cling to - on the inside and the outside - it's all that that keeps us from the abundant life God longs to give us. And isn't that on full display in these time of our national life? The addictive polarization of our politics seems to me more and more like a petulant refusal to let go of things - our deadly certainties about what is true and what is not (never mind if it *is* true or not), carefully drawn caricatures of people with whom I disagree, privilege, status, disastrously fragile egos - you name it.

Today's gospel is a meditation on the tragedy of the inability to let go.

I believe Jesus knew this earnest young man who comes running up to him. "Good teacher," says this guy, a little breathlessly in the presence of the great Rabbi Jesus, "Good teacher, what do I have to do to be saved? I've kept all the commandments I can think of, I say my prayers, I do some good works ...

what else can I do?” And Jesus, looks at him, I suspect, in a way he’s never been seen before. “One more thing,” says Jesus, “Go and sell all your possessions and then come and follow me.”

Wait a minute! We knew it was a trick - the bishop interim is going to talk to us about money today after all. No, I’m not. This gospel’s not there to get us to give our money, I believe it’s there to save our souls. It’s there to set us free.

I think this is a story about freedom, about the deepest levels of our relationship with God. It’s a story about what makes us truly human. This scene between Jesus and the rich young man comes just after Jesus has scolded his disciples for trying to keep the children from coming to him. He’s been out there teaching, and he’s just had a bunch of kids in his lap. I’m thinking his clothes must have been sticky from whatever it is that made first century Jewish kids sticky. He’s just told his friends that children show us the way into the Reign of God’s when this young guy comes up trailing behind him all his stuff. And I don’t mean just his physical possessions. He’s burdened down with all kinds of things. He’s worried about getting it all right, keeping all the rules, doing more and more and more. As though any of that is going to guarantee his ticket into heaven. “Get over it,” says Jesus. “It’s not what you have, it’s not the quantity of your good deeds that God is interested in – it’s you. Just you. It’s the little, open-handed child inside of you. God loves you just as you are, without any of all that other stuff. Learn that, and you’ll be on the way.”

This is what God is up to. This is the whole purpose of the church, this fellowship of people who have been drawn to the Jesus who looks at us and loves us more than we can know. The God who loves us just as we are and loves us too much to leave us that way. The God who wants to raise us to new life.

Let me tell you a story from my own life about all this - “Let’s see what we can make of all this.”

That’s our God. There isn’t any brokenness in our lives, no loss, no heartache, no struggle - nothing that has been torn from our grasp, nothing we have held onto that’s precious to us, nothing that God can’t pick up with us, take home, and see what we can make of it. It’s what we do at the heart of this congregation. Week by week, coming together at that table of God’s delight, bringing along with us all the stuff - broken or otherwise - all of it. We bring it to the table, offer it up, ritually let go of it, and then what? It is broken, blessed and given right back to us. All of it. Same life, but charged now with the eternal life of God, filled with possibilities, filled with new life, filled with resurrection. We bring our lives here together. And that makes all the difference.

So let’s live, day by day really live. Let’s risk it. Let’s share it. Let us put our faith into practice - empty our hands and see what abundance God wants to give us all.