

Letting Go

By Glenn Brumbaugh

So how good are you at getting rid of things?

Do you keep a pretty tight ship, or do you have that closet or cupboard
that you can just never seem to clear out?

It seems to be a part of getting older.

The longer we live, the more stuff we tend to accumulate.

But it's not just "stuff" that is the problem.

It's those possessions we have that have memories attached to them,
that have sentimental value to us.

An example is this cheap little plastic lion that a relative gave to me
when I was just a little guy.

For most of my adult life, this was tucked away in a box
somewhere in my closet.

To be honest, I forgot I even had it.

But lo and behold, when my mother shipped me a package
she put together from my old room, there it was.

Now I'm not even sure at this point who even gave this to me,
but I'm sure it was one of those beloved aunts, uncles, or cousins
who has now become part of my cloud of witnesses.

So it now sits on a shelf in my bedroom closet.

It's a lot easier to keep a hold of things that we find comfort and security in
than to let them go, isn't it?

It's hard to make those kind of decisions.

But it's just not those sentimental keepsakes that are tough to part with.

There are many items in our lives that give us security,
that remind us of better days in the prime of our lives.

We grow up with values that become guides in how we look at the world
and that provide a measure of security for us as well.

They keep us grounded.

Often they inform our political positions and allegiances,
as well as how we manage money, raise our children,
in other words, many facets of our lives.

They can be tied to our culture, our experiences,
and the faith tradition in which we were raised
or were a part of in our young adult years.

Like our beloved treasures that gather dust around us,
these too are things that we often find difficult to part with,
or change, as we mature in life.

In our continuing story in John this week,

we find the people who are following Jesus in Capernaum
facing those same problems.

Last week we talked about how visceral the imagery Jesus used
in eating his flesh and drinking his blood,
and how like in our physical bodies when we ingest nutrients our body needs,
we discard those parts that have no use.

Well, Jesus expands a little further on this thought this week.

He tells the disciples that he abides in the Father,
and through eating his flesh and drinking his blood,
the disciples abide in him.

We talked last week about the revulsion and blasphemy
that the imagery of cannibalism and non-Kosher preparation
would have caused his Jewish listeners
but that wasn't the only offensive part.

The relationship he is describing between his audience and the Divine
is a radical departure from the religion and faith they would have been taught.
Jewish theology is very individualistic.

Your whole faith is based on your individual relationship with God.
They had a cultural and religious identity as “God's people”
but their whole faith was built on the choices you made as an individual,
that you followed the rules,
performed the required rituals and observances,
and had an appropriate fear and reverence for a God
that controlled your life, but that you were removed from.

Now Jesus is telling them that he is between God and them, and that by joining with him,
they too abide with the Father.

He's changing their faith from individualistic to communal.

He's pulling the rug out from under those tenets of their faith
that have kept them grounded and given them security for generations.

It's important to note that he's not kicking those hallowed practices to the curb,
but leading their focus away from those traditions being the path to true life.

It proved to be too big a pill to swallow for many in the crowd that day.

According to our reading, there were a great many following him to that point.

After this little proclamation, the number dwindled
to a core group of twelve.

Yet the lesson doesn't just end with the audience in the biblical story.

The author of John also was addressing a Christian audience in the second century.

Being the last of the Gospels to be written,
the people hearing and reading this gospel
would likely have been associated
with an established congregation of Christians.

By this time, the rituals of baptism and communion

were already firmly established as central tenets of the faith
pretty much across the Christian spectrum.

John's message would have had a similar effect on them as well.

Using such graphic language to describe the sacraments,
as well as discounting the flesh in favor of the spirit,
downplays the central role of those rituals
to true relationship with God through Christ.

Again, John doesn't suggest kicking them to the curb either,

but stresses instead the importance of the relationship and community
over the rituals themselves.

After all, they are ordinances, rituals that Christ told us to emulate and repeat.

The other three gospels include communion and baptism as ordinances,
and John adds footwashing as well.

But John indicates that they are to be outward symbols

of the relationship and communion they represent with God through Christ,
led by the spirit.

As we think about our own faith, do we have a closet that needs cleaned out?

What ritual or religious baggage are we carrying that needs to be discarded?

Like in Jesus' time, the rituals and rules are not the problem so much

as how they can affect our perspective, often to our own detriment.

There was a young man that attended school in a large north-eastern city.

In his studies he fell in love with eagles. He read everything he could about eagles.

He watched documentaries about eagles and the more he studied
the more he loved eagles.

He promised himself when he graduated college

he would travel out west to observe the eagles in nature.

He found a job teaching and saved his money all year.

Summer came and he booked a flight to the area where eagles could be found.

He rented a Jeep, took his camping gear

and away he went in his search of eagle watching.

He talked to locals and found a good area and he set up his camp site.

He took his binoculars and telescope and set them up.

The next day the young man never saw any eagles.

He traveled deeper into the cliff areas and he observed up the mountains.

Finally the second evening he spotted a beautiful eagle soaring high in the sky.

He watched where the eagle landed on the nest.

Before the sun came up the man had moved where he could watch the eagles.

His experience was much greater than he expected.

For several days the young man watched the nest and the flight patterns of the eagle.

He focused in on the nest and saw baby eaglets.

One morning he was observing a male eagle soaring in the sky and to his amazement
the eagle went into a dive and with great speed

the eagle dipped beneath the tree line.

In a few minutes the eagle was back soaring in the sky.

All of a sudden the beautiful young eagle started free falling from the sky.

The eagle was limp. It dropped from the sky at a high rate of speed.

The young man started hiking to the area

where the eagle had fallen to it's death.

When he arrived he found the dead eagle and attached to his chest

was a dead weasel.

Seems the eagle had swooped to the ground

and had captured a weasel in his sharp talons.

As the eagle started flying upwards the weasel had dug into the eagles chest

and had dug the eagles heart out while in mid-flight

as the eagle was clinging to the weasel --- he refused to let go.

The eagle could have dropped the weasel to it's death and then re-captured it for food.

Hanging on to the weasel was sure death for the eagle.

The young teacher stood over the lifeless body of the eagle and cried,

“Eagle all you had to do was let go!... all you had to do to live was let go!”

Are we any better than the eagle in this story?

Can we let go of those things that pull us away from Christ?

Like the Jews in our biblical story and the early readers of John,
we need to look at our traditions, our religion, and our rites and rituals.

All those things that inform our opinions and behavior.

Do they make us more like Jesus in our behavior, our values, and our opinions
and beliefs?

Do they keep our focus on being a part of the holy community with Christ,
or do they turn our focus inward as individuals?

Letting go of those treasured keepsakes can be difficult for sure,
as it was for the eagle to let go of the weasel.

But clearly there is a better choice to be made, isn't there?

I hope and pray we have the courage and strength to let go of the weasels in our lives,
and that we can muster the motivation to clean our spiritual closets
so we can join together to abide in God through Christ,