

Letting Go

Learning to release the emotional ties that hold us back from achieving our greatest good.

Good morning and welcome to Superbowl Sunday Sermon, where we know all the TRULY religious will be praying today!

I'd like to start off with a favorite quote:

"The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past ... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude... I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you... we are in charge of our attitudes!" That's a quote from Charles Swindoll, an evangelical Christian pastor, author and educator.ⁱ His words so resonated with me over a quarter century ago that I have kept a plaque with those words on it in my office ever since I first heard it, and I often read it to remind myself what it is I can control in my life when everything else seems to be going out of control.

I'm delighted to see all of you hear this morning. The very idea of *Letting Go* conjures all sorts of thoughts in people. Most of us have a hard time letting go of certain things in our lives, and yet we may be very effective at others. At different times in our lives, we may have to learn to let go of relationships, loved ones – when they depart this earth, friends that move away, homes in which we grew up, teachers we enjoyed, the old couch that we had in college . . . maybe even some of our dreams and goals when we were younger. I'm sure there are those of you out there that are better at letting go than others, but most of us still have SOMETHING that we can let go of. If you take just a moment, can you think of something material in your home that you are holding on to that you should probably let go? Now, if you're married, can you think of something that your spouse is holding on to that you know they need to let go of? It's always easier to let go of someone else's stuff! If all you want to do is let go of the stuff in your life, there are lots of good books and articles out there that talk about getting organized and getting rid of clutter. Web MD even offers up an article in a recent edition about how to clear out clutter in your life.ⁱⁱ

Getting rid of material stuff in our lives is probably the easiest thing for most of us to let go of, as long as we follow a few basic rules. We look at an item and ask ourselves when we last used it. If it is more than a year or two, then we may seriously want to consider giving it away or donating it if it's in good condition. As caring, socially conscious people, it **should** be easy for us to ask ourselves "Is there someone else who might be able to use this more than I," whether it be an article of clothing, an old bicycle or even an old appliance that has been

resting in the garage for the past four years. Of course, there are people that have a difficult time letting go of anything, and we now refer to those individuals as **hoarders**. The advantage of being a hoarder is that you may get to be on that A&E show called “Hoarders.” They don’t make any shows about people that are good at getting rid of stuff. Apparently, healthy psychological profiles just don’t sell on television, and dealing with the psychology of hoarders would take a lot more time than I have this morning.

Letting go can be a challenge to us on several different levels. There are times that we may hold on to a disagreement or a disturbing episode, such as a rude driver or someone who hurt our feelings unwittingly. For those instances, we may simply need to take pause – breathe deeply and tell ourselves either silently or out loud – “let it go.”

Letting Go is an important concept that I believe anyone who wishes to move forward, with real change in their life, has to master in order to be successful and truly happy. Buddhist philosophy is often focused on the concept of letting go.ⁱⁱⁱ It is essentially the basis for meditation – developing a technique to release the stresses from the day and calming the soul by reflecting inward, focusing and relaxing. The more adept an individual becomes at this technique, the more often and more rapidly they can call upon a sense of mindfulness and centering when the chaos of daily activities start to dominate and impair function or attitude. Buddhist teachings tell us that we aren’t supposed to let go simply for the purpose of letting go, but rather as a way of accepting that nothing is permanent and that life is constantly changing. Learning to let go helps us to move on and be open to all that the world has to offer.

We all have things in our lives that we hold on to. In Buddhism, they are taught to let go of worldly possessions and to focus on the meaning of existence and our relationship to those around us. I’m not professing that you should all run home and take everything you own and give it to Goodwill or the homeless shelter, but I do believe that learning to put things into perspective can derive a much greater sense of satisfaction and peace than we currently have.

When I was ruminating over what I wanted to convey to all of you, I was thinking more along the lines that we all hold on to demons from our past . . . both recent and distant. We have relationships that never had closure or that we never released from our minds. We’ve had experiences at work, church, school and home that have haunted us for much of our lives. Bosses, preachers, teachers, parents, siblings, friends and acquaintances have often impacted our lives in a negative way, and yet we have been unable to release the feelings that we experienced from when those interactions first occurred. Feelings of being inadequate, uncertain or inferior are no less dangerous than those of conceit, arrogance and superiority. All of those feelings come from a questioning of our own self-worth and a distorted self-image that we have clung to for some unknown reason.

This morning’s sermon could have just as easily been titled “Holding On,” because both the process of letting go and holding on require us to evaluate the true value and reason for keeping things in our lives. I would be willing to bet, if I were a gambling man, that virtually everyone here this morning is also holding on to something emotionally that they really don’t need - something that no longer serves them beneficially in any way shape or form. Some of us hold on to the words of a parent that constantly berated us or criticized everything that we did – perhaps we felt abandoned by them because of a grossly dysfunctional behavior, such as

alcoholism, bipolar, or schizophrenic disorders. There are those among us this morning that have suffered the pain of growing up with parents that divorced when we were young or a parent or parents that died before we ever had a chance to really know them. Some of us have had employers that stifled our creativity and condemned innovation or took credit for our ideas. We may have had a teacher that told us we may never amount to anything or that we would never be good at math or English or science. Some of us have developed self-doubt about our own ability to learn something new because we're in our 40's, 50's, 60's and beyond. We may question our ability to learn a new career or keep up with current technology. We stay – or have stayed – in a relationship because we worry that no one else will ever love us or find us worthy of being loved, despite the fact that we knew (or know) the relationship is dysfunctional. Isn't the old saying – "better the devil we know, than the devil we don't know." We hold on to all kinds of insecurities, self-doubt, dysfunctional behaviors and destructive, self-deprecating thoughts and habits – but why?!

Letting go is a healthy way to purge our inner beings of the chains that bind us. Just as with a good spring cleaning, when we clear out the clothes that no longer fit and the broken old fishing pole that has been sitting in the garage for three years - despite the fact that we no longer fish. Developing the ability to let go of the unnecessary clutter in our minds will bring a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. It may even open up the necessary space to allow us to pursue those dance lessons, learn to play a guitar or finally write that book that we always wanted to.

Often we may rationalize our behaviors and not acknowledge what it is that we would be best off to eliminate from our lives. Let me offer an example of what some people might view as acceptable behavior while others may recognize it as destructive. Perfectionism is a term that some people have used as if it were a self-aggrandizing form of braggadocio, but true perfectionism, as a personality trait, can be debilitating and self-limiting.^{iv} A perfectionist personality trait may cause people to have high levels of stress and even anxiety attacks. It can lead a person to start projects and never finish them. The idea of completing something and it not being perfect is overwhelming to the perfectionist personality, and anything less than perfect is unacceptable, so better to leave a project unfinished than to complete it - not be perfect - and effectively fail. After all, is anything ever perfect? Isn't there always something that can be done to make a project better, whether it is painting a room, building a shelving unit, preparing a meal, or writing a term paper? For those with a self-evaluating standards of perfectionism, the anxiety that develops from attempting to correct every little mistake or imperfection can be more than just frustrating, it can lead to depression, withdrawal and psychogenic illness. Where and why would someone develop such a disorder? Have any of you had, or known of someone who had a parent, guardian or spouse who was hyper-critical of virtually everything you did? They may have even had the best of intentions, hoping to point out what you did wrong on a project or assignment in school, how you made your bed, washed the dishes, folded your towels, washed the car or anything else. They may have thought that they were teaching you the BEST way to accomplish the task, and by pointing out what you did wrong, they were helping you to be the best you could be – equipping you with the knowledge or skills necessary to succeed in this world. What might have been missing, however, were the words of praise to point out what you did right or how well you accomplished some other task.

Growing up with an influence like that in your life plants a subconscious message that anything LESS than perfection isn't good enough. The balance was missing. There's a huge difference in the message, "You know you have a few drips over there." As opposed to: "The overall appearance really looks nice. You've done a great job!" Learning to let go of being a perfectionist and learning that some things, most things, are just fine when they reach a "good enough" standard, is imperative for the perfectionist to become a realist and learn to enjoy and appreciate what is accomplished and not dwell on what could still be improved. It's okay to strive for constant improvement as long as you regularly take time to accept and appreciate what you have accomplished and what you already have. A perfectionist needs to learn to let go!

The beautiful thing about letting go is that every time we learn to let go of something unhealthy, destructive or debilitating, we open ourselves up to the potential for something healthy, constructive or confirming to come into our lives.

I wish I could tell you that letting go was a simple process, but for most of us it isn't – if it were, then we would have already let go of our bad habits and destructive thoughts and memories. [In the 1992 movie, *A league of their own*¹, about an all-woman's baseball league formed during World War II, Geena Davis, portraying one of the stars of the team is talking to her manager, played by Tom Hanks, and she remarks during an intense practice session "This is hard – this is really, really hard." Tom Hanks responds by saying "Of course it's hard, it's supposed to be hard. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it!" I love that line, because it applies to so many things in life. Life doesn't have to be difficult, but the things that matter the most to us take work, and if we really want a change in our lives, it generally requires hard work.]¹ Letting go, can be a process of following some basic techniques, but, it still takes time, consistency and determination to effectively make a change for most people. For some individuals, simply making up their mind to let go of a bad behavior can occur just by determining for it to be so. [My aunt smoked cigarettes for 50 years. I always recall how she would hack and cough every morning, like she was going to die, whenever I would spend the night at my cousin's house. She wouldn't stop coughing until she lit up that first cigarette. Then, at the age of 70, she developed some early signs of emphysema. She had some young grandchildren at the time and told herself that she wanted to see them grow up, so she said she was going to stop smoking – and she did! She never smoked again. She lived until the age of 86 and died after suffering from a fall, but had she not quit smoking, she never would have made it to the surprise 80th birthday party that my cousins threw for her!] For most of us, it doesn't work quite that easily, so I want to share two techniques with you this morning: If you were here a few weeks ago when Reverend Carl did this exercise, he had you come up front and write down something that you wanted to leave behind as you started the New Year. I want you to write down something on this paper that you want to let go of, it can be a memory, anger, hate, a personal trait you don't like, such as being too critical, too negative, or anything else that you'd like to let go of – please, just don't write down my name. You will have an opportunity, either during our offering, or at the end of service, to come up front and use the flash paper to let go, if you feel so inclined.

¹ The examples contained within the brackets were omitted during the Sunday service due to time constraints.

Secondly, I want to teach you a brief form of self-hypnosis, or meditation that may help you whenever you are thinking or experiencing something that you just want to let go of. Now, please get comfortable with both feet on the floor and your hands resting comfortably on your thighs. Start by taking a big breath into your belly – not your upper chest. Feel your belly lift outwards. Take your time and inhale slowly and then exhale slowly, feeling your body relax. Repeat that one more time – take a deep breath in – then exhale slowly and let all the air out. I want you now to think of something in your life that you want to let go of. It can be the same thing that you wrote down on the paper or anything else. Try to feel what it is about this thing that makes you want to get rid of it. Now, I want you to take another Breath in through your nose, but as you do so this time, imagine a pure white energy, like a white puffy cloud or a bright white light that you draw into your body. As you exhale, I want you to picture a grey, dark cloud that leaves your body and exits from your mouth as you exhale – and, as you do so, realize that you are ejecting the behavior, thought or memory that you want to let go of. It leaves your body and has been replaced by a beautiful white light that fills you and brings with it a sense of calmness, peace and completeness. You can repeat this process, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Some big concerns may take a couple or few times in order for us to let go. You can open your eyes now, but remember this little exercise, and anytime that you are troubled by a thought or behavior, even stress or fear, practice this activity and let it go as you fill yourself with the pure white cloud and light.

Now, I would be a bit remiss if I didn't mention to all of you that today officially launches the annual Pledge Drive for our congregation. This allows us to continue the good work that we do here each week, providing a sanctuary for us to gather and share fellowship and ideas, pursue social justice and spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. A year ago, some in our congregation had to let go of the fear of not being able to secure the pledges necessary to obtain a full time minister. Here we are, one year later enjoying the re-vitalization of our wonderful congregation. This year we are planning another Fellowship Dinner on March 9th, so please hold the date, and you will soon receive a letter and brochure in the mail outlining our campaign. I ask you to simply think hard about how much this congregation means to you and our community. I hope you will pledge generously, as you are able, and give freely and with a loving heart. If you want to let go of old habits of procrastinating about giving your pledge, then you certainly have my permission to let that go. There are so many of you here that work so very hard to make this place a welcoming and loving congregation – donating your time, your money, your experience. I thank you all for your service and your generous contributions.

As we are taking collections this morning, please feel free to come up and light your paper and let go of whatever you wrote or on the paper.

To paraphrase words from Mahatma Gandhi: *A person is but the product of their thoughts. What you think – you become.*

So let's all think healthy thoughts – let go of what holds you back and hold on to that which preserves the essence of your being.

ⁱ <http://www.oneplace.com/ministries/insight-for-living/?gclid=CNuz5KXH1bQCFcuZ4AodmDIAIA>

ⁱⁱ <http://women.webmd.com/home-health-and-safety-9/10-ways-to-cut-clutter-in-your-home>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.existentialbuddhist.com/2011/02/letting-go/>

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^{iv} http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=28552

^v <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0104694/>