

"Holding On and Letting Go"

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February 13, 2011

I Corinthians 13

This is the great love chapter in the Bible, read at most weddings, but written, not for a bride and groom but written to a church, the church in Corinth. Some of the commentaries wonder if St. Paul really wrote this passage. It's such a beautiful piece of writing that some wonder if perhaps it was written by someone else and then incorporated into Paul's letter, just like a preacher or speaker might quote a song or piece of poetry. I feel a little sorry for Paul in this regard. It's probably the best thing he ever written, and people feel that it's so good he couldn't possibly have written it! Let's take a look. I Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

A man had two visions - one of heaven and one of hell (if you struggle with the idea of hell, or if you're like me and just don't like to think about it, please try to put that aside for a minute). The vision of hell was one of a great, long banquet table. And on the table was the most extravagant, mouth-watering feast you could ever imagine. Serving plates piled high with food - every type of food under the sun as well as scrumptious desserts. But then he notices something very wrong with this picture. The people who are seated up and down the long table, are looking longingly and sadly at all the food. They're profoundly sad because attached to their arms are incredibly large silverware - a large long spoon and fork. So they can't reach the food right in front of them. And that is hell.

The vision of heaven was very similar, almost identical. Same long banquet table. Same mouth-watering food. And the same long silverware

strapped to their arms. But in heaven the people are eating and enjoying the feast. You see, in heaven each person uses the long silverware to feed the person across from them. Because, Heaven is for those who have learned to love.

Is there anything more important in life than learning to love? Not according to St. Paul. *"So abide faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."* That's really a remarkable statement, especially coming from Paul, the first and greatest theologian that the church has ever had. But he says, Love is more important than understanding all the mysteries of our faith, having all the divine knowledge humanly possible. Love is more important. Love is more important than being able to explain all those mysteries with the eloquence of an angel. Love is more important. Love is more important than being able to perform miracles - move mountains, speak prophecies, actually speaking the words of God. Love is more important.

Of course love is not easy. Love can sound simple and easy, but we know it's not. St. Augustine once said, "Love, then do as you please." But it's not that easy. It's not that simple, is it? - deciding what the most loving thing is to do? To love well is often very challenging and complicated. It's also the highest virtue of our religion. Jesus said, *"By this will all people know that you are my disciples, that you love one another."*

Last year on the Sunday closest to Valentine's Day we looked at Love Languages - different ways to express love. The message was based on Dr.

Gary Chapman's book, Love Languages. Chapman believes there are five basic ways to express love - through words, gifts, acts of service, quality time and touch. He says that most of have a favorite or two. When we are loved with our favorite "language" we feel really loved. We tend to love others out of our favorite language. But our favorite and our loved ones' favorites may be different. So we might be loving our spouse or a friend in a way that would feel loving to us, but it might not be to them. Love is complicated.

Today we're going to talk about another tricky aspect of love - holding on and letting go. Years ago there was a hit song on the radio by a odd duo - John Denver & Pacidio Domingo. The song was called, *"Perhaps Love."* It said, *"Some say love is holding on and some say letting go. and some say love is everything and some say they don't know."*

It seems to me that to love others we have to practice these opposite habits of the heart - *holding on and letting go*. In the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Scriptures, Ruth says this to her Mother-in-law, Naomi - *"Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God."* That's holding on to someone and communicating it to them. But it's also letting go of something - it's letting go of the right to live a totally independent life - *"Where you go, I will go."* It's holding on and letting go. Marriage itself involves both. It's letting go of singleness and holding on to partnership. It's letting go of a Me-First mentality and holding on to a "We-First mindset." It's letting go of the right to change, control or fix another person and holding on to them in all their uniqueness. I

Corinthians 13 says, "*Love does not insist on its own way.*" - that's letting go. But instead, "*Love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things.*" - that's holding on! So sometimes we have to be letting go and holding on at the same time! - no wonder It's so hard! Think of it like holding a bird in your hand. If you squeeze it too tight you'll harm the bird. And if you hold it too loosely it will fly away. Holding on and letting go.

A. Grief.

I think holding on and letting go is a very helpful concept that relates to a lot of different areas of life. For instance, think of grief, loving our loved ones who have died. One of the hardest things to do in grief is to eventually to let go of the grief, convinced that you can let go of the grief without letting go of your loved on. You can allow yourself to know joy once again, eventually letting go of the deep sadness, and still holding on to the person, cherishing them in your heart.

B. Let's take another issue - Forgiveness.

Forgiveness involves holding on and letting go. Love is not irritable or resentful. It bears all things, endures all things. Forgiveness is letting go of the misunderstanding and holding on to the person, believing that the relationship is more important than the misunderstanding.

I had a misunderstanding with someone this week, someone I think a lot of. And so I apologized and said, "I wasn't in a terribly good mood when we

talked. I wasn't at my best and I'm very sorry. Please accept my apology." The other person said, "Oh, I wasn't having a good day either. Don't worry about it. We're fine." "We're fine" was music to my ears. That's letting go of the misunderstanding and holding on to the relationship.

Sometimes, of course, forgiveness is a little different. Does forgiveness always imply holding on to the relationship? If someone had truly wronged you, taken advantage of you, abused you - do you have to hold on to the relationship? Of course not. In that case, you may decide to let go of the relationship and hold on to your dignity.

If you take your car somewhere to be worked on and they rip you off, you want to eventually forgive them, for your own sake, to cleanse you spirit, getting rid of all the negative energy - bitterness and resentment. But once you've forgiven them, does that mean you have to take your car back there again? No, you let go of the negative energy and hold on to a sense of fairness and justice.

C. There's one other issue I want to touch on, and that's patience.

We Americans are not always the most patient people in the world. We invented instant coffee and fast food. We want same day delivery, instant messaging and the fastest computers we can get. We finish each other's sentences and give instant advice, not taking the time to really listen. But Paul says, "Love is patient."

Car Wash Story. A few years ago I had an experience that gave me an image

for impatience. I went through a car wash with my car in "drive." (I don't recommend this!) You know how they always tell you to put your car in neutral. I forgot. So as soon as it kicked in my car took off and went flying through the car wash, which threw off the timing of everything. I thought I was going to die! I fully expected the windshield to crack, everything was crashing into the car! So that's impatience. Impatience is having it in "Drive" when we should be in neutral. It's rushing things along at our imposed pace, not allowing the pace to unfold as it should. Patience also involves holding on and letting go. It's letting go of the need to control the situation and holding on to the person for who they really are, allowing them to simply be. Karen Casey: Truly loving another means letting go of all expectations. It means full acceptance, even celebration of another's personhood.

I'd like to close with a story and then a poem. The story is about one of the most loving acts I've ever witnessed. It had to do with a Groom and Bride on their wedding day. The Bride was almost an hour late for the wedding. (I always tells couples to arrive on time. It's obviously very stressful to be kept waiting and inconsiderate of one's partner to be late). It was 25 minutes after the start time when we first heard from the Bride. She was 25 minutes away. The organist had run out of prepared music and began playing Christmas carols (this was in October!). We eventually announced that we'd be starting late, invited people to get up and stretch and even check out the Women's Fellowship Craft Sale next door! Well, finally the bride arrived at the church. She needed a little more time to get herself together and then we started. As she came down the aisle I wonder what the groom would say to her. What would you say if

you were him? I know what I would have probably said, "Glad you could make it." Do you know what he said? He looked at her and said with tears and joy, "You look beautiful!" Now that's a man who knows how to love! That's holding on and letting go!

I'll close with this reading entitled, *To Let Go*. It's often read at Al-Anon Meetings, and you'll understand why as I read it. It goes like this:

To "let go" means not to worry about the future, but look forward to what might happen

To "let go" does not mean to stop caring, it means I can't do it for someone else.

To "let go" is not to cut myself off, it's the realization I can't control another.

To "let go" is not to enable, but to allow learning from natural consequences.

To "let go" is to admit powerlessness, which means the outcome is not in my hands.

To "let go" is not to try to change or blame another, it's to make the most of myself.

To "let go" is not to care for, but to care about.

To "let go" is not to fix, but to be supportive.

To "let go" is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being.

To "let go" is not to be in the middle arranging the outcomes, but to allow others to affect their own destinies.

To "let go" is not to be protective, it's to permit another to face reality.

To "let go" is not to deny, but to accept.

To "let go" it not to intrude, worry or argue, but instead to search out my own shortcomings, and correct them.

To "let go" is not to regret the past, but to grow and live for the future.

To "let go" is to fear less, and love more.

Amen!