

“HOLDING ON AND LETTING GO”

Luke 9:28-36; Acts 10:1-16, 23-24, 34

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Peter always gets a bad rap for the Transfiguration story—this morning’s gospel lesson—where Peter, James, and John go up the mountain with Jesus, there to be confronted with a vision of Moses and Elijah chatting with Jesus atop the mountain. Peter is perplexed. He doesn’t know what to make of this situation. Two long dead men, the two most important men of his religious tradition, men who have come to symbolize scripture and received tradition are suddenly there before his eyes talking with his beloved teacher. “Let us make three booths for you all to stay in,” he suggests. To me, it looks like an attempt at respect, a gesture of honor. I’m not sure any one of us would have come up with a more graceful response given the circumstance.

What gets Peter in trouble here from biblical critics through the centuries is the implication of permanence of the shelters. Foolish Peter. How could he have believed that the group of them would stay up on the mountain forever? Didn’t he know that his future, Jesus’ future, the work of teaching and discipleship, all these were down in the town with the crowds where life was messy and difficult, not up on the mountaintops where theology and religious experience are pure and clean? Equally importantly, didn’t Peter realize that the most significant and careful work of religion is discerning when to hold on and when to let go?

When to hold on and when to let go. Peter wanted to hold on to this pristine moment, confusing and outside of his experience as it was. He wanted to continue to live in that moment of absolute certainty of God’s presence and the power of that certainty. And the minute he reached out for it, it all fell away, and down the mountain they all went, off to do the work of religious life.

Interestingly, the gospel writer Luke gives Peter a second chance to work on his holding on and letting go skills in the story of Cornelius in the book of Acts. As many of you know, Luke is the only gospel writer who takes the story of Jesus beyond Jesus’ death, giving us the book of Acts to transition the story of Jesus into the story of the church. The early chapters of Acts reveal to us the first great controversy the infant church had to weather. Jesus’ disciples and his earthly followers were Jews, and the group of Christians based in Jerusalem and headed by Peter were all Jews, but that upstart apostle Paul had begun preaching the gospel among the gentiles.

Now Jews and gentiles did not mix. That prohibition was absolute; it had been not just part of Judaism, but essential to Judaism for 2000 years, a cornerstone of religious faith and practice. Think about Mississippi in 1910 and the separation of blacks and whites. The doctrine of separation between Jews and gentiles was stronger, more profound, more deeply ingrained in Jewish life and culture than racism in the unreconstructed South. It was a big issue. The early church was at war with itself over whether gentiles needed to be circumcised, whether they needed to become Jews first, in order to be baptized and become fully Christian. Peter was the primary articulating voice of the circumcision party. Circumcision was scriptural, commanded by God to Abraham. It was tradition. It was a core value that had served the religious community well for thousands of years. Peter had traveled to Joppa for a discussion with those who opposed him, and as he was praying one day he had a vision—which you heard read this morning—a vision of a great sheet being

lowered to the ground filled with non-Kosher foods, foods an observant Jew would never eat, part of the absolute separation between Jews and gentiles. In the vision, God commanded Peter to eat this food. “What God has called clean,” a voice proclaimed, “you must never call profane.” Peter awoke, and soon after went to meet Cornelius. When he met this faithful, devout, God-fearing gentile, Peter had a choice to make. Should he hold on to thousands of years of history and tradition, scripture and teaching, all that was exemplified by Moses or Elijah, or should he let go and trust the Holy Spirit whose presence God had promised in the church, who had sent him a vision, and who had led him to the door of the extraordinary gentile named Cornelius. This time, Peter chose to let go. He baptized Cornelius and all of his household, and stayed in that house sharing food and accommodations with gentiles for a number of days. And the story of the church was changed forever.

That was the first time the Christian church made such a decision to go with the movement of the Holy Spirit, even when it seemed in opposition to the weight of scripture and tradition; but it has happened since and, God willing, it will happen again. This morning along with thousands of churches throughout the world, we sing as our final hymn, “Amazing Grace,” a hymn written 200 years ago this month by a former slave trader named John Newton. He wrote the song to celebrate the end of the slave trade in England. Those who supported the morality of trafficking in human cargo argued that slavery is found in the Bible. Neither Jesus nor Paul ever spoke against it. In fact, Paul gives specific instructions in his letters telling slaves to be obedient to their masters. If God then intended and supported slavery as an institution, who are we to deny it?

So the argument went. William Wilburforce, a man who struggled between the vocations of minister and politician, and compromised on becoming a religious politician, Wilburforce argued that despite the specific words and traditions of scripture, there is no spiritual gospel without a social gospel; and further, that the Holy Spirit alive—both in scripture and in the practice of the Christian faith—proclaims that freedom is the bottom line in Christ. And so, on Feb. 23, 1807, Wilburforce introduced to Parliament the bill that would eventually end the 19th century slave trade. Wilburforce used the argument of the Holy Spirit alive in scripture and alive in us to overturn the letter of scripture. It was an act of both political and theological courage. We honor him, as well as his friend, Mr. Newton, as we sing “Amazing Grace” today. But even as we celebrate their courage and their victory, we have also been asked to remember that by the best estimates we can make, there are still some 37,000,000 million people in the world who live and die as slaves. More for church people to speak out about and change.

From the first century to the 19th, and now on to the 21st. This past week, a story came across my desk about a Lutheran pastor, The Rev. Bradley Schmeling, who had, in accordance with ELCA polity, been ordained as a homosexual man as long as he would agree to be celibate. After many years of ministry, Schmeling, now pastor of St John’s Lutheran church in Atlanta, Georgia, has entered into a committed relationship with another man. He informed his bishop who, in accordance with Lutheran discipline, instituted disciplinary action to remove Schmeling from the church. Those who advocated on Schmeling’s behalf used the story of Peter and Cornelius to argue that the policy requiring celibacy of gay and lesbian pastors may be based on the church’s traditional understandings of homosexuality and marriage, but that as the apostle Peter came to understand his received tradition and scripture to be in error, so must the church in our day when the Holy Spirit is clearly leading us to a more inclusive view of the GLBT community. In a surprise decision, the disciplinary committee concurred, pronouncing that the Lutheran church’s policy is “at the very least bad policy and likely in conflict with the constitution and by-laws of the denomination which

call for fair treatment for all.” The committee has asked the church in its national meeting in May of this year to overturn the policy. Amazing grace indeed.

There are times to hold on and times to let go.

In the Christian church, our scripture and tradition are important, invaluable guides to us as we struggle with how to live out Christ’s call to discipleship in our time and place. But we must always remember that as early as the second century, church leaders were wary of changing the names of the “memoirs of the Apostles” (as they were first called) to gospels, as we call them now, because to do so might lead some to rely solely on the dead letter of scripture and the weight of tradition in ordering the life of the church, rather than acknowledging the ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Scripture itself gives us the warrant and basis of change in stories like this morning’s encounter between Peter and Cornelius.

It is tempting for most of us, like Peter, to want to tarry in the thin clear air of the mountain top, securely surrounded by Moses and Elijah, the comforting substance of what has led us to this present day. But also like Peter, along with Jesus and the other disciples, it’s down the mountain we must go to the push and pull, the questions and challenges that are the responsibility of our generation to encounter in faith. We are not supposed to find it easy or clear cut. But God’s promise to us is clear: it is here in those difficult and messy spaces that we will encounter the Holy Spirit and here that we will discover God’s amazing Grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.