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“Grace in Letting Go”

John 12:20-26, Philippians 3:7-14

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Two weeks ago, I preached on God’s consolation—how it differs from the shallow comfort of self-help or prosperity theology. While God may be everywhere, we don’t always *find* God’s presence everywhere. We may confidently speak of God most when life is going well, but often it is only to claim God’s endorsement for how we are living and what we believe. But Scripture and experience show that God draws closest in our struggle, our pain, our loss—when our own answers fail us. That’s when Christ’s suffering love binds us to God and to one another in shared vulnerability.

That doesn’t mean we should seek out hardship. We should receive joy with gratitude. But it’s not ease that most deeply changes us—it’s grace meeting us when life unravels. It’s in the letting go that we are reshaped.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann once noted that although much of Israel’s history took place in times of stability, most of the Bible was shaped during seasons of upheaval: slavery, exile, famine, oppression. There are parts of Scripture—like Proverbs—that reflect a stable world: “[Live wisely and things will go well.](#)” But that’s not where most of Scripture lives. Most of it was forged in crisis.

Which means many of the passages that are read from this pulpit—and for which we say, “Thanks be to God”—were birthed of loss—of need—of searching. And yet, they are deeply life giving—encouraging. That’s the paradox at the heart of the theology of the cross: we don’t just find God in death—we find life on the other side.

Today, I want to explore the encouragement side of consolation when God’s grace meets us not only in letting go but also in the embrace of what follows.



Let's turn now to two passages that bear witness to this grace found in death—and the life that follows.

John 12:20-26

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “**Sir, we wish to see Jesus.**” ²² Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “**The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.**”

Philippians 3:7-14

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

The Word of the Lord! (Thanks be to God!)

A tourist and a pilgrim meet at a crossroads.

“**Where are you going?**” the tourist asks.

“**Home,**” says the pilgrim.

“**Oh,**” the tourist says. “**I’m heading back home too—where I came from.**”

The pilgrim smiles: “**My home is where I’m headed.**”

There you have it—the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim as theologians like to imagine it. Both travelers, but with different aims:

- A tourist travels to experience something new.
 - A pilgrim travels to be changed.
- A tourist asks, “**What will I see?**”
 - A pilgrim asks, “**Who will I become?**”



- A tourist takes a break from daily life.
 - A pilgrim seeks life in the journey.

Now, of course, this contrast is a bit overdrawn. I love traveling as a tourist even though my children urge me not to look like one when I do. (Although Margo McCord, bless her heart, loved my fanny pack). When I travel, I hope for new wisdom and experiences that stretch me and stay with me, that might even change me. But still—there’s a difference.

Tourism is usually a round trip. Pilgrimage is a journey of transformation. It doesn’t take us back to where we were—it leads us forward. And living forward always requires leaving something behind.

So, in your life, are you going to be a tourist or a pilgrim?

That’s really a trick question. Because here’s the thing: your life is going to be a journey no matter what. None of us get to stay where we are even if your address remains 1199 Oxford Dr. Life is a journey. Time marches forward, forcing us over and over again to let go.

“Time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’... into the future.”

The baby becomes the toddler,
 the toddler becomes the child
 the child becomes the adult.

For those who cling and can’t let go, time is a thief—not just slippin’ but creeping, stealing what we hold too tightly—our innocence, our youth, our certainties, our loved ones.

How many movies tell that story? There are so many, because it’s life.

- The loss of childhood innocence in *Inside Out*.
- The heartbreak of divorce in *Marriage Story*.
- The comic refusal to grow up in *Old School*.
- The painful drift of adolescence in *The Way Way Back*.
- The grief of losing a parent in *On Golden Pond*.
- The loss of purpose after retirement in *About Schmidt*.
- The final goodbye of one’s own death in *The Bucket List*.

(I’ve watched a lot of movies.)

These stories move us because they name our experience: Living means letting go.

But the pilgrim embraces the journey that we all must go on. The pilgrim *expects* to let go. The pilgrim doesn’t cling to what was, but seeks what is ahead. That’s the path of the pilgrim—letting go to move on.

And that’s where our Scriptures meet us today.

First, let’s listen to Jesus.



He is in Jerusalem at a Passover festival. Word of his teachings and miracles has spread far beyond Judea and he is now a public figure of extraordinary renown. But, Jesus knows he will die, and he will die soon. It is on his mind when some Greeks approach him, brought to him by Phillip and Andrew.

Why are these Greeks at this Jewish festival?

They sort of sound like tourists—spiritual seekers who have traveled to witness something sacred, but new to them. They're probably what were called "God-fearers": non-Jews who were drawn to Judaism's moral vision and monotheism. They're curious. Maybe they've heard of Jesus raising Lazarus. Maybe they just want to meet the man stirring so much talk with the company he keeps, the debates he wins, and the stories he tells. But instead of receiving them casually, Jesus shares with them what is on his mind.

He says: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."

That line sounds quaint, until you realize that Jesus is musing on his own death *and* is speaking to death being the path to new life for these Greeks. For all of us. He's not just giving a theological window into what's about to happen on the cross. He's describing dying as a way of living.

We might imagine those Greeks leaving confused or shaken. Maybe they aren't ready to hear all that. But perhaps, years later, they will encounter Paul when he journeys to their part of the world, and he'll help them understand.

By the time Paul writes the letter to the Philippians, he has become a seasoned pilgrim—a master at letting go as demonstrated by how he walked away from a life of status and moral certainty. "Whatever gains I had," he writes, "I regard as loss because of Christ." The kind of things we strive for and cling to: the right heritage, the right credentials, the right résumé: they became ballast to him. Heavy weight. And when Jesus stopped him on the Damascus Road, Paul began the work of letting it all go—of dying to the self he used to be—so that he could come alive in a new way.

It wasn't just once. Paul did it again and again.

- Paul loses prestige
 - but gains purpose.
- He loses friends like Barnabas
 - but finds new partners in mission.
- He loses his freedom
 - but becomes a witness to prison guards and those who read his letters.
- He even comes to see his own sufferings as a way of sharing in Christ's life.

What Jesus and Paul show us is that a life well lived is a life that willingly dies in order to come alive over and over again.

Whether we are willing or not, those moments of little deaths followed by new life come constantly. Sometimes it is easy and sometimes it is hard. You see it with children. On the first



day of preschool, some walk into the classroom ready for the adventure and the possibility of new friends. Others cling desperately to their parent's neck not wanting to enter whatever this is. Happily, over time, even the clingers become the embracers.

We hope and pray that the children will carry that courage forward, which for some might be

- grade to grade,
- home to dorm,
- single to married,
- carefree to caregiving.

And you pray that whenever it gets really difficult, God will give them the grace to stubbornly look for what might come after loss—say when.

- The job is lost.
- The marriage ends.
- A loved one dies.
- The body no longer can do what it once could.
- A belief once held turns out not to be true.

We pray again: that God will be found in the grief, that grace will be met in the letting go—and in the embrace that comes after—with the pilgrimage continuing with wounds healed and what gifts are gained.

I have had many conversations with elderly people who have reason to welcome the possibilities of each new day.

- Some once were athletes who spent hours training and were rewarded on the field, in the gym, or the dance floor. But those days are gone.
- Some had significant positions at work, or in the community—or were quietly good at what they did and got great satisfaction from it. But that work is over.
- Some could manage to do everything on their own, but now need help in the morning, and count on someone else to do for them what they once did for themselves. They walk slower, or with a walker. They lean on others. But they are still fully alive.

I've been noodling this sermon for a while which is why I recently thought to ask a question of one of these souls who had adjusted so well to losses over a long life. He had been an athlete; he had several jobs he loved. He enjoyed one big family when he was young and now is the only surviving sibling but enjoys another big family with grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He lived all the different chapters in his life fully. He continues to find purpose each day. Thinking about this sermon, I asked him how he handled having to let go of so much in his life:

He answered:



“I have never had a big problem with letting go. I always knew there was something ahead. People to love and care for, things I could be about that could be meaningful to me. Whenever life changed, my attitude was, ‘Well, this is my life now. How am I going to live it?’”

I can’t speak for everyone who has managed over life to find encouragement beyond consolation, but I know with this individual that his faith plays a critical role. He has learned from the long instruction of God’s consolation that because Christ lives, we live; and that in the heart of death there is the seed of resurrection. He believes that. And believing that, he is able to let go, and ready to live each day, until the day that his pilgrimage brings him to his true home.

This is the grace in letting go:

Not just what ends,
but what *begins*.
Because all our letting go in this life
is practice—
for the final letting go,
and the final embrace.

Charge:

Go now as pilgrims on the road of grace.
Let go of what you cannot hold,
trusting the One who holds you still.
When life unravels, may Christ meet you in the ache,
and may his suffering love bind you to God and to one another.
And as you go,
may the Spirit lead you not back to what was,
but forward—always forward—
toward the home that awaits.

