



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Letting Go

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### DATE

Lent V  
Sunday, April 7, 2019

### PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

Once upon a time, in a village not so very far from here, there lived a little boy. He lived with his mother and his father in a cozy yellow house with blue curtains in the windows. One day when the boy was almost three and a half years old, he started going to school. He and the other children played many different games at school, but the little boy's favorite thing was to play with blocks. Not big blocks; these were thin little blocks which came in different lengths. All of the blocks were painted a different color: the longest ones were orange; the shortest ones were green.

If he laid them out on the floor, two blues added up to a brown, and a brown and a yellow equaled an orange. But the little boy wasn't interested in laying out the blocks and adding them up; what he liked doing was building as big and strong a tower as he possibly could. Day after day, when it came time to play with the blocks, the little boy sat down and built the same solid structure. It was about this wide... and this high... And it was very, very secure.

There was another child in the class, a little girl, who also loved playing with the blocks. Each day, however, the little girl built something new. Sometimes she laid the blocks out all over the floor to create different patterns. Once she tried to make a tower that would lean waaayyy over without falling. Another time she tried to stand the blocks all end on end – on tippy toe. Or she might try stacking two shorts, then four longs; six greens and three reds. Very often, the things the little girl built fell over even before she completed what she had pictured in her mind. When this happened, the little girl would pause for a moment, look at the scattered blocks, and then start building something new. She wasn't really sure, but it felt like each creation was a little bit more exciting than the one before.

Sometimes the little boy watched as the little girl constructed her colorful, precarious structures. He thought she was very silly and he shook his head in disbelief. But the little girl didn't mind; she was busy trying to build a rainbow.

Some years ago, I came across a definition of prophetic ministry that continues to nourish and provoke me. It works for me on a personal level, and I see it as operative as we consider the mission of our congregation. The definition is this: "The task of prophetic ministry is to evoke an alternative community that knows it is about different things in different ways. And that alternative community has a variety of relationships with the dominant community." (Walter Brueggemann) Now, this is a fairly open-ended statement, yet very powerful, full of potential.

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To “evoke an alternative community” – presumably with unique values, particular patterns of relationship and behavior, that does not acquiesce or seek to conform to the dominant community. This is what the prophet Isaiah calls for: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Isaiah’s words speak to me of a new shoot springing forth, God desiring to make a new way, bring new life, as the buds of spring around us burst forth announcing a new creation.

As we find Jesus this morning at the home of his friends, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, there is an impending sense of loss and ending. Jesus is headed to Jerusalem. They may not know what is to come, but they sense that what they have had together is coming to an end. Mary wipes his feet with costly perfume; a gesture of love and farewell, a premonition of burial. We can look from this vantage point and see what they could not: that they had to relinquish the life they knew to gain the life to come. Mary is acting upon this prescient knowledge. Often, bringing about the new requires breaking with the past, a break which can feel scary or drastic. Often, this is what is called for if we are to realize the kingdom of God in our midst.

This morning, I would like us to focus on one, quite specific step in any process of growth: namely, letting go. In order to try and evoke or create something new, we must first be willing to let go of ideas or things or relationships, sometimes even dreams, that bind us.

Growth invariably involves a process of birth, life, death, rebirth, new life, and so on. Release precedes creation. The tower must fall before a new one may be constructed. Carl Jung observed, “All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble... They can never be solved, but only outgrown. This ‘out-growing’ occurs as some higher or wider interest appears on the person’s horizon, and through this broadening of his or her outlook the insoluble problem loses its urgency. It is not solved logically in its own terms but fades when confronted with a new and stronger life urge.”

Some years ago, I was trying to lead in a congregation that was obstinately committed to its past: a stuck system that sucked me into its airless patterns of behavior. Everything I thought I knew about my own abilities and ministry felt futile and were called into question. It became clear that how I was acting and who I was being were ineffective and unhealthy – for me, my family, and the congregation. Gradually – and with more than a little pain, I found myself letting go of what I had thought I needed to be and do. Gradually, I discovered a new understanding of my ministry emerging. I shifted attention from the goals that had proven unattainable; I ceased pushing against walls that never gave way. I looked for energy and vitality from other sources. I set new goals. I asked God to shape and mold me anew. I came to new understandings of my self as a leader in that place. And I experienced loss, release, and new life.

Let us consider Isaiah once again. He is addressing a people in captivity, in exile in Babylon. In this passage, he begins by hearkening back to God’s earlier act of salvation in their exodus from captivity in Egypt. “Thus says the Lord, [who is the one] who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior.” This is one of the defining memories of Israel’s understanding of herself. Remembering God’s past actions of salvation was for the Hebrews then, as it is for us today, one of the primary requisites of our faith. Which is what makes Isaiah’s break with that memory all the more dramatic: “Do not remember the former things. I am about to do a new thing.” If you cling desperately to the past, you will not be able to embrace the future that God is offering.

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Remember the conversion of the apostle Paul. He had it all: privilege, accomplishment, stature, and then, when he met Jesus on the road, he relinquished it all, to follow the spirit of Christ. He rattled it off his CV: circumcised according to the rules, member of the tribe of Benjamin – proper lineage; Harvard law, clerked for a supreme court justice, amassed a fortune, leader of good causes, hale fellow well met, even “blameless.” “Yet” said he, “whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” I regard all that I had as rubbish, in order now to gain Christ and be found in him. At any given moment, we stand on the cusp between the dying old and the emerging new.

If we want to welcome in the new, if we want to change and grow, if we want to outgrow insoluble problems or evoke an alternative community, if we want to receive the new life God desires to give to us, we must let go of the old: release it. If we hang on tightly, the only thing we will end up with is a solid tower of blocks. If, on the other hand, we can let the pieces fall and lay scattered on the floor, then we might suddenly imagine a new design, new possibilities of arranging them, new visions of who we might become.

I do not know who or what is binding you right now... perhaps nothing. Maybe you are looking at all your bright colored blocks wondering what to do next. But if you sense that you have constructed a thick, solid fortress, about this wide... and this high... If you are only seeking ways to increase your security or avoid any shaking of the foundations... Then it might be time to pull out a few blocks from the bottom, or try to extend a couple of oranges out farther than they seem like they will go.

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

The little girl in once upon a time built her structures with care but when it came time for their collapse, she let them fall. She paused, looking at the bright colored pieces, and then a new image arose in her mind. Perhaps if she put the greens and the purples over here... then the yellows could go on top. That would be simply grand! Amen.