

Jeremiah 18:1-1
Psalm 139:1-5, 13-17
Philemon 1-21
LUKE 14:25-33

LET GO AND LET GOD

Part #1 -- interactive, with the kids

[I invite the kids up in front of the altar, where I'm standing with a large, closed box.] I have something special in the box, enough for everyone! Just close your eyes and imagine what it might be! Keep your eyes closed and I'll open the box. O.K.: now you can all put two hands each in the box and grab two handfuls. I'll take some too after all of you have had your share. Now you can open your eyes.

And what you have, each of us and all of us equally, is two handfuls of STUFF. [The box was full only of shredded paper.] Sometimes we see something advertised on TV or something in a store and it looks really cool, we buy it and bring it home and two weeks later -- uh, where is it? Maybe under a bed, or behind a sofa cushion, or broken, or forgotten, just one more piece of stuff. Sometimes, we give in to the thousands of ads we see or hear and buy more STUFF, and that's all it is. Stuff.

Let's think -- would anyone here rather have your two handfuls of stuff or...a puppy? [Reactions.] Well, if you were going to pick up a puppy, what would you have to do with the *stuff* in your hands *first*? [Let go.] O.K., if you were going to hug a *person*, what would you have to do first with the *stuff* in your hands? Right, **let go**.

Are animals more important than stuff? [Yes.] Are people more important than stuff? [Yes.] Is God more important than stuff? [Yes.]

That's exactly what Jesus says in today's Gospel. To really love God, to really love people, to really love all creatures great and small, we have to remember that they are all much more important than STUFF.

O.K., now we can *let go* of our stuff back here in the box and -- can you see someone in the congregation you'd like to hug? Now that we've let go of our stuff, our hands are free to receive much better gifts from God! [Each of us go and hug someone.]

Part #2

Our Jewish friends and neighbors are celebrating Rosh Hashanah, literally “the head of the year”, referred to in secular calendars as “Jewish New Year’s”. Unlike the secular New Year’s Eve with party hats, noisemakers and a big, loud crowd in Times Square, the High Holy Days are a very sober and sobering observance with personal reflection and self-examination.

I think they have the calendar right: September really feels like the start of a new year to me far more than January does, and most certainly in a college town like this one. But today’s scriptures do not make us think about the start of this new year as a football pep rally or fraternity and sorority rushes. These are sobering scriptures which call us to reflection, introspection and -- only if we are really willing -- to commitment.

The Psalmist declares his awe for God, who was involved in creating him from before his birth and who knows him profoundly. We, too, should bow down in awe before our Creator, who also has had plans for each of us since before our births.

The prophet Jeremiah reminds us that the Lord who made us can also **un**make us -- individuals or an entire country, no matter how much that country might think it is God’s Chosen People, if that person or country turns away from worshipping the Lord and following in his ways.

Perhaps some people and even some nations are tempted to worship “stuff” and put it at the center of their lives, only to find out too late that *ultimately*, it’s all worth less than a box of shredded paper. We can’t “take it with us.” The one who “dies with the most toys” dies and leaves them all behind.

Jesus may sound harsh and even cruel with his rabbinic hyperbole in today’s Gospel. But if we love God *first*, all our loves for others will be strengthened -- *once they are in their proper, secondary places*. After all, if instead we were expected to love parents first and most -- well, some parents are not good people. Some are abusive. Some are violent. Some are criminals. Some are exploitative and manipulative -- emotional “black holes” who suck all the care anyone could ever offer into themselves and still demand more and more.

In C.S. Lewis’ novel The Great Divorce about the great divide between Heaven and Hell, an adult son who has gone to Heaven is granted permission to meet his mother, who has gone to Hell, at a sort of mezzanine where he tries to persuade her to love God first and so be able to join him in Heaven. It was an enormous act of love for her on his part to leave bliss and reach out to her. She, however is angry when she sees him and

denounces “any God who would keep a mother and son apart” and declares to her son, “If you really loved me, you’d come and live in Hell with me.” No. He won’t put her first, for she would consume him forever.

God wants to liberate us forever.

To be liberated by God, however, we must become God’s servants first and foremost -- sounds like a bit of a paradox, yes? “Whose service is perfect freedom.” Loving God means *letting go* of what we might want to *clutch* so that our hands will be *free* when God offers us something *better*.

In today’s Epistle, we hear St. Paul *asking -- asking, not ordering* Philemon -- to *let go* of his *ownership* of his slave Onesimus and instead to receive him as his beloved brother in Christ. St. Paul was inviting Philemon to grow spiritually so radically that his spiritual growth would eclipse and overrule what he had been taught about economics, Roman law, and the value of people, all of which would have told him that his *slave* Onesimus was a *thing* which could be bought and sold, punished and chained up.

We don’t know how Philemon responded to Paul’s letter.

But we do have the letter, which tells us that Philemon did not angrily burn it, but kept it and allowed it to be copied and shared. Would we do the same if the apostle had asked us to give up one of our possessions?

What we do know for sure is that Vinnah, who will be baptized today, is being invited by God to “*grow into the full stature of Christ,*” which is as radical and profound as spiritual growth can be. *So are all of us* invited to radical, profound spiritual growth.

We know what Philemon was invited to let go of: ownership of a person, a way of life as a slave-owner, and perhaps a meaningful part of his financial net worth -- in order to grow as a follower of Christ. Let each of us begin this school year with reflecting on these scriptures and asking, “What is God asking me to let go of?” And, “What far more wonderful gifts does God have to offer me that I need to have my hands free to be able to embrace?”

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