

## **Worship Service of July 17, 2016**

### **Sermon: "Letting Go" by Jesse Anderson**

First reading: "Story the First" from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" - [http://hca.gilead.org.il/snow\\_que.html](http://hca.gilead.org.il/snow_que.html)

Second Reading: "SIT-A-LONG with JUNDO: Four Noble Truths II" - <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/treeleafzen/2008/09/sit-a-long-with-jundo-four-nob-2.html#ZuFXKTGpEfSQb0OG.99>

Sermon:

I hate to admit it, but I had never watched Disney's "Frozen" before preparing for this service. My nieces and nephews are a little too old to take to the movies, and my great nephews are all a little too young, so it was something I had set aside for later.

So, while in my mind the topic was wholly unrelated, Susan reminded me that the song "Let It Go" is so popular that it is almost universally part of our consciousness. I guess it was time to get the DVD and see.... Ironically, I ended up starting out by needing to let go of my original outline.

I'll try to avoid spoilers, but since "Frozen" is a Disney film some sweeping generalities are probably safe...

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The practice of "letting go" is common to most faith and spiritual traditions. In my own life, I actually find the most fulfillment at the blurry spaces between things - the edge of forest and field, fusion cuisine, classical music played by thrash-metal bands - that kind of thing. While sometimes uncomfortable, I find that these places force me to think, giving consideration to where I am and what is going on in a way that being in the middle of some space could never do.

So, when I come across something that spans multiple, completely disparate, concepts or spaces, it fascinates me.

"Letting go" is one of these concepts.

To get started, it might be easier to turn things around and look at what we hold on to - possessions, attachments, affronts, illness - things both good and bad. In Andersen's "The Snow Queen," Kay, the character that would be Elsa in Frozen had a speck of a magical mirror stuck in his eye - a mirror that magnified all that was bad or ugly in the world and reduced all that was good and beautiful. While Kay didn't realize that the mote was in his eye, he held on to what it caused him to see in the world since this was what he knew.

I find some of this in myself. It is easy for me to hold on to all the bad I've done, without giving consideration all the good I've been given.

But even the good is something that is ultimately beyond our control. The biblical story of Job is a classic example of this, and it seems that every time we turn on the news we have modern day reminders.

So, how do we deal with this?

The Buddhist tradition offers some advice on this. It reminds us that misfortune is unavoidable, and that it is a craving for avoidance of misfortune that causes suffering. It is the process of letting go of this craving that leads us away from suffering.

Insurance can help us rebuild a house or replace lost possessions, but what about less tangible things. Thinking about Frozen, what about Elsa's carefully hidden lifelong secret being publicly revealed at the end of act one?

This can be much, much harder, and in the movie leads us directly into Elsa's famous song. Since the secret is out, her act of "letting go" becomes a rebellious one, using her magic without care of who sees it. The irony is that despite the force or her conviction and desire to let go, it becomes obvious that she isn't really doing so.

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So far as I can tell, there are two parts to "letting go." The most obvious is the act itself, but if one concentrates on letting go, suddenly the act of letting go becomes something else you are holding on to, and quickly the exercise becomes circular.

I'm not going to try to teach you to let go, because I think it is something that, while it can be learned, can't really be taught. I can, however, give you some advice on what has helped me:

Learn to Body Surf. If you've never body-surfed, basically you're surfing, but using your body as the surfboard. If you don't have a beach handy, you can learn to surf, or downhill ski, or mountain bike, or rock climb, or even gardening - any number of activities can help you practice. I'll talk about body-surfing, but you can translate into whatever it is that you like to do....

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I grew up on the Jersey Shore, one town away from the location where the eponymous MTV show would be set. In my home town, the way the sand bars formed on our beach was particularly good for body surfing. The waves would come in steeply to the bar, then break for a hundred yards or more to the shore on a good day.

At our beach, you head past the outer edge of the sand bar, bobbing up and down as the waves come in, learning the waves' pattern so that you can catch the largest - trying to avoid the flow back off the shore.

At the right moment, you swim as hard as you can, matching speed just as the wave breaks. Riding the wave's crest, you can't really see or hear, just feel the water's turbulence. Planing your body to stay in the thickest part of the wave, you try to ride all the way to the shore.

The key here, and it is the one shared with so many other activities, is that you need to concentrate on the *process* and let the *outcome* be whatever it is.

Concentrate on the process. Accept the outcome.

In body-surfing, if you stop, even for a moment, and say “I want to go there next,” you crash out of the wave into the sand below - I can show you many literal scars from making that mistake.

Take a moment and think about what you like to do..... Concentrating on process..... Accepting outcome.....

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In most of these activities, the process can help steer your outcome, but can't direct it.

Knowing this is one of the first steps to letting go. In spiritual traditions that practice letting go, this is thought of as cultivating a spirit of equanimity or freedom - concentration on what moves you toward the good, without being weighted down by what moves you away from the good. You constantly take steps, even if they are baby-sized, toward the good, realizing that it is ultimately up to God, the Universe, or perhaps that particular wave you are surfing to determine exactly where you end up.

But, like the Kay in “The Snow Queen,” you are often so comfortable and familiar with the things that move you toward the bad that you don't even recognize that they are there. During her song in Frozen, Elsa did let go, but not of the things that were truly keeping her from the good.

This leads to the second part aspect of letting go - discernment. Before we can let go of something, we need to understand what it is we are letting go of. Until we have understanding, we can't really understand why we are letting go and what process to take.

Reaching this understanding isn't always possible, and several traditions warn about times when we shouldn't even make the attempt...

In Ignatian terms, we are said to move between a spirit of consolation and desolation. Most traditions that recommend letting go have similar terms - I'm just going to stick with these. Consolation isn't smugness or joy, but is a feeling of oneness or closeness with the Universe, God, or the Good. Desolation is the opposite, a feeling of being remote from whatever you chose to call the Holy, often manifesting as sadness, loneliness, despair or rage.

This doesn't mean that goodness has removed itself from you, just that you *feel* remote from the good.

It is considered unwise to make a decision in this state, as the weight you are feeling will tend to pull you further away from your journey. In an extreme case, one may actively steer themselves toward the bad and away from goodness. Elsa was in this state in the movie, and the same was true of Kay in The Snow Queen.

The first step in moving away from the bad is realizing that the Good is always with you - you just may be unable to see it. This is something we remind ourselves of with our typical service opening from Psalm 118 - *This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

You will often see this phrase on posters with beautiful sunrises over meadows, mountains or beaches, but the psalmist's original intent was to give thanks to God for surviving being beset by enemies.

In these terms, every day is a day the Lord has made, and it is incumbent on us to find something to rejoice and be glad about. Finding this is the first baby-step back toward consolation.

So, letting go shouldn't be an act of rebellion or spite. When we decide to do so, we may leave something where it is, we may remove it from ourselves, or we may remove ourselves from it, but it is a recognition that whatever it is has no, or at least limited power over us anymore.

If truth be told, while a magical, wonderful thing, letting go won't really change anything in the world except ones self. In the movie ... OK ... spoilers - just watch the movie, but I'd bet that by now you can guess.

Ultimately, letting go is an act of faith - faith that doing so will make a difference ... faith that it will have an impact on your life ... faith that it is important.

Discern ... concentrate on process ... have faith in outcome. Let it go.

Let us pray...

Prayer for Intercession - William Barclay (1907-78), adapted...

Spirit of Good,

help us all through this day so to live that we may bring help to others,  
credit to ourselves and to the name we bear,  
and joy to everything that loves us.

Help us to be cheerful when things go wrong;  
persevering when things are difficult;  
serene when things are irritating.

Enable us to be helpful to those in difficulties;  
kind to those in need;

sympathetic to those whose hearts are sore and sad.

Grant that nothing may make us lose our tempers;

nothing may take away our joy;

nothing may ruffle our peace;

nothing may make us bitter towards anyone.

This we ask for love's sake. Amen.