

Sandra Stogsdill Brown  
*Love It and Lose It*  
John 12:20-33  
March 18, 2018 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent)

Our Gospel reading today begins with this little detail: some Greeks, some people who do not share the same Jewish heritage as Jesus and his followers, seek out the disciple Philip and say, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” You see, Jesus has been gaining more and more attention for his teaching and his miracles, especially his most recent one, raising Lazarus from the dead. People saw it, and they are talking, and the religious leaders are paying attention, and plotting to kill him to avoid unwanted attention from the Roman authorities. Jesus knows his time is very limited. It’s a little bit like Cinderella at the ball, dressed to perfection, dancing with the prince in her glass slippers, when all of a sudden the clock begins to strike midnight, and she knows the hour has come and for her, the ball is over. In the same way, Jesus hears that some non-Jews want to see him, and for him this is the sign that his earthly time is ending. Listen now to God’s word as it comes to us in John 12:20-33 . . .

There’s a Swedish movie called *Force Majeure*. A “force majeure,” which is French for superior force, is an unforeseeable accident or circumstance that prevents someone from fulfilling a contract or obligation. The plot of this movie features a Swedish family on a skiing vacation at a luxury resort in the French Alps. Mother, Father, two school age children. One day, they are eating lunch outdoors on the deck of a restaurant. As they are eating, they see a controlled avalanche. Apparently, controlled avalanches are pretty common in the Alps, in order to prevent the uncontrolled kind. Anyway, the avalanche comes closer, and closer, and the rolling cloud of powder it produces makes it look like everyone on the deck is about to be wiped out. People start tearing out of there, and the mother grabs the children and pulls them close, to

protect them. But the father, in that same moment, takes off running as fast as he can, ski boots and all, leaving his wife and kids encased in a thick fog. In a minute, the fog lifts, and everyone returns to the deck of the restaurant. The father comes back to his family. And the rest of the movie is about this man and his family coming to terms with what he has done, and what it means. It will definitely make you think.

One of the things it made me think about was—well, first of all, wondering how I would react in a situation like that—I hope I would behave sacrificially and unselfishly, but I don't know. I could imagine being in that father's situation, and feeling that sense of panic, and wanting to run for my life. [And don't we wonder about that deputy whose job was to provide security for the students and teachers at that high school in Parkland, Florida, but who somehow didn't go into the building to confront the shooter who killed 17 people in six minutes. It's so easy to feel disgust, and yet I have to wonder how I would have done in a situation like that ]. . .

Our human nature is to cling to life as we know it. It is not easy to face our own death, and I know there are those of you here who have been in some very scary situations, either in war or in the hospital or out there protecting our community. But even Jesus wasn't particularly excited to face suffering and death. He says so right there in verse 27: "Now my soul is troubled." There's a sense of this whole speech serving as a kind of pep talk that Jesus gives himself to face what lies ahead. He reminds himself, as he teaches his disciples, hey, death is necessary. Look at the grain of wheat, he says--nature itself shows us that the only way for new life and growth to happen is through death. There are no shortcuts to the resurrection—the only way is through the cross. We cannot have Easter without Good Friday.

A couple of sermons ago, I mentioned the famous Joseph Campbell quote, “We must let go of the life we have planned, so as to accept the one that is waiting for us.” This is our pattern, the lesson we must learn over, and over, and over again.

A couple weeks ago, there was a knock at the door of my home up in Meriden, the old Kansas Grange out by Lake Perry. And a very nice young man asked me a question that nobody had ever asked me when I lived in Johnson County, and certainly not in Southern California: “Ma’am, would you mind if we looked for shed antlers out back?” First time for everything, I guess. And I’m thinking to myself, “Shed antlers? Are there special antlers that people put in their sheds, or something?” And the young man was kind enough to explain to me that shed antlers are antlers that deer shed each year in order to grow new ones. They have to let go of the old ones, however spectacular they may be, in order to let their new, fresh antlers grow in. Not just once in their lifetimes, but EVERY. YEAR.

The question I’d like us to ponder today is: What is God asking you to let go of, in order to give you something new? What have you outgrown, that you need to drop, to make room for new growth? What needs to die, so you can be transformed?

I asked myself this question. The first thing I thought of was my realization about a month ago that I needed to drop a very bad habit that I had. It was a habit that developed slowly, in a rather sinister way, which was to come in to the church office on my day off to make sure I was getting everything done. It was an egregious violation of the sabbath, I still didn’t get everything done, and apparently the stress was starting to show up in my face, which some of you courageously pointed out to me.

God was calling me to let go, so God could give me a new sense of energy, purpose, and plain old FUN in my life and in my work. So I am, and it’s working.

The second thing I thought of was also work-related, but this one is harder. And that is: I believe God is asking me to let go of fear, in order to lead more courageously. The big temptation for many pastors and other leaders is to keep the peace. Especially these last few years, as we've experienced some profound transitions, keeping the peace has felt like the wise way to go. But preachers are called to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable. If we never move beyond comforting the afflicted, we're not leading responsibly. Sometimes in a pastoral conversation, I've been too quick to reassure someone, when perhaps I should have challenged them about their behavior or something they've said. Sometimes when planning my sermons, I have avoided important topics that we should probably, eventually talk about. I've thought, naw, let's not go there. Someday, we're going to have to go there.

Now, sometimes when I've done this, it's out of a desire to focus on what we have in common, to work on building unity. But there's also some self-protection going on. I'm afraid that if I challenge you too much, if I make you too uncomfortable, you might get angry. And if you get angry enough, you might not want me around anymore. A little self-protection is not a terrible thing—it's generally a good idea for pastors to be sensitive, diplomatic, and careful with their words. But if pleasing others becomes any leader's guiding principle, guess what? Pretty soon they won't be saying anything worth listening to. The more fearful we become, the more we will have to fear, because fear-based leadership won't get us anywhere.

This whole passage from John is really about fear. Jesus is troubled by the suffering that awaits him, as any of us would be, but he won't let fear control him. He keeps his focus on his Father, and on the mission his Father has given him.

Fear is what verse 25 is all about: "Those who love their life lose it." The more we fear losing our lives, or clinging to the way things are, the smaller that life will get until it eventually

becomes no life at all. For example, someone who suffers from the disease of hoarding cannot give or throw anything away, no matter how unsafe their home has become. In their attempt to save everything, they end up losing their space, their health, their relationships, everything.

Whatever God is calling you to let go of today, it probably has something to do with fear. Whether you're letting go of a grudge, a habit, an attitude, an object, or a person, chances are if you look closely, there's a fear underneath. As much as it hurts, let it go. You do not need it anymore. God is already growing something wonderful to take its place, even if you don't see it right away. It's coming. It's there, like a pair of new antlers waiting to grow.

The question of letting go is also a question for us to ponder as a church. What is God calling us to let go of as a church in order to make room for new life and new growth? How do you sense that the Spirit wants to shape us and where might she lead us in the months and years to come? What are we clinging to, that might be weighing us down and standing in the way of the new thing God wants to do? This should be easy for Presbyterian churches, right? Since one of our mottoes is, reformed and always being reformed?

Maybe we need to let go of the idea that it's somebody else's job to invite people to come to church, to greet new people warmly, and to invite them to the activities we do together. Maybe we need to let go of the idea of church as a building and a place, and embrace the idea of church as a community that we embody and a way of life that we bring wherever we go. Maybe we let go of the idea that we're too old for this, or too young for this, or too busy for that. Maybe we let go of the old youth group model and focus on intergenerational opportunities. Maybe we let go of worrying about being an aging congregation, and celebrate instead all the wisdom and stories among us, and become experts on offering excellent ministry with those who are aging, and learn to see that gray is gorgeous. Maybe.

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.

Spring is almost here. It's a good time to clean. It's a good time to plant. It's a great time to see what's growing,