

MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH LETTING GO

Philippians 2:3-13

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Publishers predicted that 2015 would be a slower than average year for book sales. They identified a few of their usual best-selling authors and planned large production on those few safe bets. One book took everyone by surprise and has become a runaway best seller. It is entitled, The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up and it's written by a 30-year-old Japanese woman who calls herself a cleaning consultant. I read it this summer and can summarize it for you in a couple of sentences. (This book review service is brought to you free of charge this morning!)...Marie Kondo has a very simple philosophy. Keep the possessions that bring you joy and get rid of the possessions that don't. Kondo encourages you to look at every single thing you own: every piece of furniture, every book, every article of clothing and ask that question, whether it's about your furniture or a knickknack or a pair of socks: "Do you bring me joy?" She claims our lives will be happier when we get rid of the things that don't. That's really the gist of the book. And by the way, it's brought great joy to its publisher!

Why has this book become so popular? The theories are that many people seem to have reached a tipping point of clutter in their lives. It coincides with the recovering economy, an increase in donations of clothing and household goods to charity (it's a great time to be in the Thrift Shop business) and a trend toward downsizing, as U.S. population growth shifts from the suburbs to city centers in many areas.

I wonder if there aren't deeper reasons, too. After so much emphasis on accumulation, on what we can acquire, sometimes we realize we've been sold a bill of goods, so to speak. Having more things doesn't make us happier. In fact, often times, having more things complicates our lives. More things to clean, more things to insure, more things to store.

And after so much emphasis on the external, on what our houses should look like, and what our bodies should look like, perhaps we're longing for something deeper. Is it time to focus on internal things, on relationships, experiences, conversations, music, laughter, matters of the heart and soul, not just material goods?

Perhaps we're being called to let go of some of our materialism and our focus on what looks good on the surface of life.

It can be hard to let go of things. I still miss some things that were special to me that I've given away. There's no question that possessions have meaning and can enrich our lives. Deciding what to keep and what to get rid of isn't always easy.

It isn't just about things, though. It is part of a spiritual discipline, a spiritual practice, that involves learning what to let go of and what to keep. In all aspects of our lives. Sometimes our own lives become like cluttered closets. We fill them with the word "should" and the word "must". "I must be all things to all people. I must never say no when people ask me to do something. I should be perfect. Perfectly fit, perfectly put together, productive at all times. I should be successful. I must earn more money every year. My family has to have all the things every other family has or else people will look down on us."

We heap these expectations on ourselves until we are so laden-down with them we can barely move. Until we barely remember who we are under all those layers. What would it mean to peel them off, one by one? What would it mean to believe that God loves us just as we are?

We've been using this quote on our printed materials this month. It's from the 14th century Italian saint Catherine of Siena: "Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire." That's how we make a difference in the world. Not by trying to be like someone else, but by using the gifts, talents, and unique experiences we have. Not by trying to be famous, or trying to be impressive, but by starting right where we are, within our own sphere of influence.

This quote became more popular a few years ago because the Anglican Bishop of London used it in his wedding homily when he officiated at the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. He said to them, “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” And then he went on to say, “A spiritual life grows when love finds its center beyond ourselves... the more we give of ourselves, the richer we become in our souls...it is, of course, very hard to wean ourselves away from self-centeredness, but it is the only way there will be a creative future for the human race.” What wonderful words for a wedding ceremony, a day which is so often pre-occupied with externals - with how things look.

And isn't it true that it really matters who we choose to spend time with? We can choose to surround ourselves with people who bring out the best in us, and then there are other people around whom we never quite feel ourselves, people who cause us to make decisions we regret. Are there people you would like to spend more time around, because you think they would encourage you to be your best self? And are there relationships you want to devote less time to? What to let go of and what to keep — it's all part of spiritual discernment.

Jesus lived with spiritual wisdom. He knew what he needed to do in order to be his best self. He was able to live in such a way that he was fully obedient to God's will for his life. His own wants and needs didn't get in the way. In our passage for today, Paul says that Jesus “emptied himself.” He let go of everything that stood in the way of him being the person God needed him to be.

What do you suppose God is calling you to let go of? What baggage are you hauling around that gets in the way of the freedom to live your God-given life? Are there messages that tell you you're not capable, you're not good enough? Is there a bag labeled “guilt” or “shame” or “regret” that is just getting so heavy you almost can't budge it? Or is your bag called something more like, “frittering away my life on trivial pursuits”? What do you need to let go of?

The Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld was the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, serving in the late 1950's. He wrote a beautiful memoir called Markings. In it you can read this spiritual reflection: "I don't know Who — or what — put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone — or Something — and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."

"Surrender" isn't a word we use very often. I don't know anyone who says to their children, "I want you to learn to surrender." But when we're talking about spiritual maturity, it's a concept we need to know. Surrender causes us to stop grasping after things and after control, and let our lives rest in God's hands.

The movie, "The Starfish Throwers," follows the stories of three individuals who each feel compelled to do something about the problem of hunger. One is a 13-year-old girl in South Carolina. One is a retired teacher in Minneapolis. And one is a man in India named Krishnan. He's born into the Brahmin caste, the upper-class of Indian society. His parents are wealthy and educated and they plan for their children to be so, too. Krishnan loves to cook, and decides to become a chef. He is accepted into a culinary institute in Europe and believes that after he graduates he'll come back to India and work in one of the five-star hotels there. Shortly before he's to go to Europe, his parents drive him to the Hindu temple to pray, to ask for God's blessings on his trip and experience. Well, God might have heard their prayers in a different way than they imagined. Because while they're in the car, Krishnan looks to the side of the road and sees a very poor man, probably someone living with untreated mental illness. The man is eating his own human waste. Krishna yells for his father to stop the car. He jumps out, grabs some food from their car, runs over and gives it to the man. He then decides, right at that moment, that he is not going to spend his life feeding rich people in fancy dining rooms. He's going to spend his life, and his talents for cooking, feeding those who are most hungry and in need.

His parents are upset. He's throwing away his chance to better himself. They actually take him to a psychiatrist. But Krishnan persists. He spends his own money, driving around, taking little packages of food to people who are living on the streets. One day he convinces his parents to come with him. They spend the day driving around with him. They watch him interact with those he serves. They see what a difference he's making. And they decide that they will support him so that he can continue his ministry. Now they have created a ripple effect of good in their city. They have built a community center where formerly homeless people are housed, where they're given rehab and treatment, where they're treated with dignity and where they live with purpose.

Krishnan had to let go of his own dreams, and of his parents' expectations of who he should become. He surrendered a lot. But what he got in return was a life that is setting the world on fire. What he got in return is his own best self.

We have to let go of certain things in order to become who we are meant to be. Like butterflies who finally shed the safety of the cocoon, those moves are often frightening and risky, far more traumatic than deciding which possessions to give away. One writer, a recovering alcoholic, compares his prayer life to his struggles with drinking. He says this, "I came to prayer the way I came to sobriety—kicking and screaming, always the last to know, but finally by surrender. The world didn't come to an end when I got sober. I didn't win the lottery, and the stuff that always happens keeps on happening, but it doesn't do me in, and I don't have to drink about it. God was in charge—mostly by default—because I so clearly wasn't."

Letting go of the fantasy that we can control everything that happens in our lives is a difficult assignment. What Jesus' life shows us is that, the more we trust in God, the more strength we gain to cope with whatever life throws our way. Surrender doesn't mean we live passively, just waiting for things to happen around us. Surrender means we listen to the voice deep within

us, and follow that God-given intuition, trusting that, in the grand scheme of things, “all will be well.” Gradually, what we let go of is our extreme anxiety, our obsessive worrying, our grasping after things and control. We then find more energy for doing the things that are within our power to do.

Letting go always leads to a deepening and an enrichment of our lives. When we create space for God, all kinds of new possibilities open up within us.