

“Let Go, Let God”

Theme: 12 Steps to a New Beginning, part 3

Isaiah 55:6-9; Romans 6:1-6



Rev. Patricia Campbell-Schmitt
September 23, 2007

This morning we continue with our sermon series, “Experience the Power: 12 Steps to a New Beginning.” In this series we are using the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as a model for the Christian walk and as a helpful spiritual tool. In Step 1 we began our spiritual journey by admitting our powerlessness over all kinds of different addictions and compulsive behaviors, our powerlessness over the realities of human pain and brokenness and our own human limitations, and our powerlessness over our human sin, our sin disease. In Step 2 we were called to turn to God, to trust that there is a power greater than ourselves that can bring healing and wholeness to our lives, a loving God revealed in the Scriptures and made known to us fully in Jesus Christ.

This morning I would like us to read together Step 3. “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” This step calls us to put our broken selves in God’s hands. There is one word that I believe summarizes the message of Step 3 and that is the word, “surrender.” This crucial surrender step is of greatest importance and greatest difficulty. It is the “fish or cut bait” of our spiritual journey where we must truly submit our lives and wills to God.

Although I was raised within the Christian church, the word “surrender” was not a good word for me during the first 30 years of my life. It conjured up images of tent revival conversion, the instantaneous, dramatic experience that occurs when a person who sees himself or herself as having been totally unrighteous now becomes totally righteous, an experience that often results in a self-righteous, moralistic, judgmental way of life under the banner of Christian faith that is totally inconsistent with the gospel as I understand it.

But the word surrender is difficult for us in another way as well. Most of us have enormous resistance to turning any significant control of our lives over to anyone, even God. This whole idea of surrendering, of releasing authority and control of the outcome of our lives to another, is a very difficult notion for thinking persons. For surrendering goes against all our childhood injunctions to “do it yourself” and “don’t give up.”

Christians face another stumbling block to surrender. Many of us live our lives as if God is our servant and will help us attain our goals. We believe that when we pray, “Lord, help me do this thing (whatever it is)” God will do it if the request is moral and not aimed at harming another. Most of us live with so much denial of our need to control and have our own way that we have trouble really knowing God’s will. So when we fall into the temptation of asking God to bless what we want, we aren’t even aware that that is what we are doing. In our denial we have the honest delusion that we are praying for God’s will. But this sort of praying and living is very different from “turning our lives and our wills over to God.”

Over 25 years of exposure to the 12 Steps have given me a new feeling about the word “surrender.” The content and meaning have changed. I now believe the word “surrender” is a good, meaningful and essential word that speaks to a profound need within the human condition. For surrender cuts to the heart of our “sin-disease”: the tendency inside all of us to want to have full control over our lives and our destinies, to control others, the universe and even God. Surrender releases us from the temptation of putting ourselves and our needs at the center of the universe and from the belief that everyone and everything revolves around us.

There are realities within each of our lives and in our relationships with other people that we can’t change. Admitting our powerlessness in these situations enables us to let go, to surrender those destructive attitudes and feelings like frustration, impatience, anger and self-pity that result when we want to change or try to change those people or situations that we are powerless over.

People coming into the Christian faith are often told that they need to surrender their lives to Jesus Christ as their Savior, to turn from all sinful desires that draw them from the love of God, to put their whole trust in Christ’s grace and love, and to follow and to obey him as their Lord. Traditionally, Christians have called this change of direction, this process of surrender, conversion. But, unfortunately, the absolutely revolutionary nature of the change called for in conversion has often been lost, and new Christians are not taught the extent of their sin-disease or their denial.

The well-known Christian author, Keith Miller, states that this was a missing piece for him in his early Christian life. He can remember no one helping him recognize that his desire to control people, places, and things in his life constituted sin, and was part of what he needed to surrender to Jesus Christ. So, although he committed his life to Jesus Christ, he continued to be a manipulative controller without even knowing he was doing this, much less that some of his “helping and control-

ling” was abusive and self-centered—fixing people so he’d feel better, and sinful—putting himself in the center where only God should be and orchestrating other people’s lives.

Now the first three steps constitute the beginning of a lifelong turning process in which the direction of our lives is changed from the way we think it should go, to the way God thinks it should go—in serenity, in humility, and in loving obedience to God’s will. But this process of “letting go and letting God” does not come easily for any of us. In fact, the Bible tells us that we really cannot do for ourselves what needs to be done. We can’t dislodge our control tendencies and the ego-centric self. We can’t save ourselves from our human dilemma. From the human perspective, it is a hopeless situation.

But the good news of the Christian faith is that God has acted on our behalf in history. In the fullness of time, God became human and lived among us entering into our pain, our brokenness, and our limitations. God came to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and the very name “Jesus” which means Savior, promises that we can be set free from our sin-disease, from our need to control, and from our self-centeredness. When Christians confess that “Jesus is Lord,” they are saying that there is a new occupant on the throne of their lives; there is a new center other than self; there is a new desire expressed in the prayer, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Now Jesus describes this change in the basic orientation of our lives as being “born anew.” This is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come.” In the 6th chapter of the book of Romans, Paul describes this change in even more dramatic terms. He says that we actually die to one kind of life and we rise to another. We die to the old life of sin and we rise to a new life of grace. We are crucified with Christ so that the person we used to be is dead, and the living power within us is now Christ himself.

An old Native American legend tells the story of a tribe near Niagara Falls that had a ritual of sacrificing one of their most beautiful daughters each year to the “Great God of the Waters.” One year the chief’s own beloved daughter was chosen by lot to be the sacrifice. There were no exceptions, even for chiefs. When the fateful day arrived, the chief could not be found to preside over the ceremony, so the ritual went on without him. The young maiden was tied into a canoe to be swept over the falls. As her canoe was pushed into the rapid current, another canoe came out of hiding to join her. It was the chief, her father, who had come to his daughter’s side to join her in death.

To the Christian this tale is familiar. It is the central fact of the cross. But more than a noble sacrifice and certainly more than a pathetic tale of wasted love, the cross of Christ is the power and the presence of the living God intervening in each of our lives. In Romans 6:8, Paul writes, “But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with

him.” It is that “with him” part that is so full of good news. With him in death and with him in life. We don’t go over the falls alone.

Of course, as Christians we know that new life lies at the bottom of the falls. When we surrender our lives and our wills to Christ, the current of God’s Spirit sweeps us over the waterfall of “ego death” and “self control.” To “let go and let God” is as fearsome as this. To turn loose of the control of our compulsions is to be swept away in terror “out of control” and “powerless.” Yet it is in this surrender that we find our salvation and life abundant.

The last thing I want to touch on this morning is how we take this third step. Once we understand what we are being asked to do, just how do we go about making a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God? This all sounds pretty simple on one hand, but there is a lot of controversy about what this step really means. The writers of the 12 steps were wise and gentle, as Jesus was. He let people walk away and wait until they were ready to come to him, and the 12 step program does that too, at each step. But when we are ready to surrender our life to Christ, some people say you just do it right then, turn your life and your will over to God.

Certainly there has to be some kind of decision to take that “leap of faith,” some decision to plunge over the falls, but “making a decision” to do something is only the first part of doing it. For example, if I make a decision to buy a house, I haven’t bought the house yet, and I certainly can’t move in this afternoon. There are a series of things I must do after making a decision to buy a house before I have actually bought it. I have to find a house, get a realtor, a lawyer, secure a bank loan, check the certificate of title, and do all kinds of other things. Then, finally, at the end of the process, I’ve bought the house and I’m living in it. In taking step 3, if you make a decision to turn your will and life over to God, you’re deciding, you’re committing yourself to “buy the house.” You’ve committed to turning your life and your will over to God. But you haven’t completed the transaction when you say the words of commitment.

But if saying the words doesn’t turn our will and our life over to God, again how do we do it? That’s where steps four through twelve come into the picture. For the next nine steps are the way to turn our whole lives, past, future, and present, over to God. So often we Christians do what is called the “three-step waltz” —one, two, three; one, two, three; one, two, three. We see that we need God and that our lives aren’t working, and we commit our lives to Christ, again and again.

But not many of us go on to get spiritually well and mature. We just keep making verbal commitments of our lives to Christ. Once we decide to give our life and our will to him, the other steps are designed to help us grow spiritually—to remove the blocks, the things that keep us from surrendering our buried, self-defeating past and becoming the person God wants us to be. Steps 4 through 12 slowly reveal to us the things that have kept us from being happy and free, from being cre-

ative and loving, from doing God’s will, and they show us how to surrender these things to God.

Short of giving you a full preview of Steps 4 through 12, I do want to say that the key to surrender in these next steps can simply be stated in four words, “reach out for help.” As we reach out to God in prayer, in study, and in worship, and as we reach out for help from our Christian brothers and sisters, we are indeed turning our lives and our wills over to the care of God. At this time I would like to welcome a guest speaker to relate her personal experiences.

Hello, my name is Kate F. and I am a recovering addict. My childhood was great! I played soccer, swam on a team, traveled, got a good education, and grew up with great morals, values, and family; in and out of St. Andrew’s. My addiction (sin-disease) found its way slowly into my life and snuck in through my insecurities and fed off my desire for acceptance. I tried cigarettes and felt cool. As a freshman in High School, alcohol and marijuana gave me artificial confidence that masked my real personality. I always felt out of place and singled out. All I really wanted were friends. My senior year, I felt even more self-conscious and overweight. I was introduced to Meth. I enjoyed the feeling of never-ending energy and freedom from responsibility. The moment I picked up Meth I became stuck in a downward spiral. Guilt and shame pushed me away from my family and I sought comfort in people who showed me how to steal, cheat, lie, and manipulate my way through almost any situation. I used the love my parents had for me to feed my addiction and enable my self-destruction. Eventually I stopped caring about my self-respect and blamed my misery on everyone that cared. Over the past ten years I’ve been hanging out under bridges, in parks, staying up for weeks at a time without any desire to eat or sleep. My last resort for money was always my family and friends. I would have some elaborate lie as to why I went through the last loan that was given to me, in hopes to get more money so I could run out and get my next fix. In an effort to continue getting high, holidays and family events became less important, I chose to hang out in dirty apartments in seedy parts of town. I had lost all hope of a Spiritual relationship and blamed God for doing this to me. I have lost many friends in their addiction and am very fortunate and grateful to still be alive. I tried to get clean in the past and didn’t want to surrender. I thought I was happy; but I was in denial.

February 2004 I found out that I was three months pregnant. I was able to stop using Meth by the end of May. I continued to smoke cigarettes and marijuana throughout the pregnancy. I also chose to live on the streets until I was eight and a half months pregnant. I was sober for the first year and a half of my son Tavis’ life; I was not working a 12 step program or going to meetings, so my addiction found a way back into my life through the doorway of boredom. This time my sin-disease took from me what was important to me very quickly. Within five months I allowed my addiction to come between me and my son. He was removed from my custody and I did nothing! I continued to use and push any responsibilities away.

Once again my life was going nowhere and I was stuck in that downward spiral. This time was scarier for me; all I could see and feel around me was darkness. My son is one of the greatest loves I have ever felt in my life; however, the feeling of freedom from responsibilities had returned in my disease and the thought that he was safe with my parents was all it took for me to sink further down into my hole of addiction. I felt alone and hopeless. I began to feel resentment for what I’d done to my son. As I looked through some of his things and thought about that first year and a half I spent raising him I began to cry in fear. I knew my life was unmanageable and I was definitely powerless over my addiction. I began outpatient treatment and realized I couldn’t get away from my desire to want to use. I immediately got a bed at Mountaindale Recovery Center and felt humility in asking my parents for help. The day I went into residential treatment was the scariest thing I’ve ever faced in my life. I then knew I could no longer hide from any feelings of insecurity or shame again. That was also the day that I realized that God had never left my side. The more time I spent in treatment, the more I began to realize how important my faith was in my life and in my recovery. I prayed to God several times a day to remove my pain. Not only physical pain, my emotional turmoil of everything I had done to those I love was very painful as well. As I began to work the steps of recovery I became more able to accept the past and work on moving on. “Let Go and Let God” is the affirmation that helped me to finally make the most important decision in my life. After God had made a strong impact in my life again, I was ready to take my third step. It took me four months to believe in myself again, to turn my will and my life over to the care of God, to guide me in my recovery, and show me how to live. . . . CLEAN!!!!

Today, if you are ready to make a decision to turn your will and your life over to God, but you need to know more about how to do this, or if you are aware of something in your life that you need to surrender, that you need to let go of in order to start growing spiritually again, but you are not sure how to turn this over to God, then know that the pastoral staff of this church, and others are here to assist you as you seek to take the next step on your spiritual journey. Please give us a call, stop by, or this morning write your name and number on a piece of paper and give it to me or Tom as you leave the church. Or, seek the counsel and guidance of a mature Christian friend, but do something to reach out for help. “Letting go, and letting God” has worked for millions and it can work for you. Will you decide today to surrender your life and your will over to Christ for his healing? All you’ve got to lose are your burdens and you will gain life abundant, a life of serenity and joy. I’d like us to close today by asking you to join me using a wonderful prayer from the Big Book of AA—the third step prayer.

“God, I offer myself to you, to build with me and to do with me as you want. Relieve me of the bondage of self, so that I can do your will better. Take away my difficulties, so that my victory over them can be a witness to others of your Power, your Love and your Way of Life. Help me always to do your will. Amen.” 6