***Letting Go***

**A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

**Delivered on May 6, 2018**

The theme for my sermons this month is *Letting Go.* I want to begin this morning with a Mediterranean story as told by Margaret Silf in her book *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World.* It is a story of a very old man who lived a long happy life on a beautiful island. He loved his homeland. Through many generations, his family had lived there, made their home there, and earned their livelihood. When he realized he was reaching the end of his life, he asked his sons to take him outside one last time. He knelt down and gathered a handful of island soil, which he clutched tightly in his gnarled hands.

Soon afterward he died. Upon arriving at heaven’s gates, the angels greeted him. When he tried to cross the threshold, however, he was unable. The angels said: “You must let go of the soil you are clutching.” The old man said he could never do that. “This,” he said, “is my native soil, the earth of my beloved island home.” So, the man wandered alone outside the gate. After a few years, the angels brought the man a taste of the heavenly banquet trying to entice him to come in. he wanted to join them but was still unable to let go of the soil he was grasping. Again, they left him. After still more years, the angels returned this time with the old man’s granddaughter who had grown old herself and died. She was thrilled to see her grandfather. “Oh, granddad,” she said, “I’m so happy you are here. Please come and join us in the heavenly kingdom. We love you so much, and we want you with us for all eternity.”

The old man was so overwhelmed to see his granddaughter, that he completely forgot himself. In his joy, he flung out his arms to embrace her. When he did, the soil slipped right through his fingers. And as he passed through the gate, he saw the whole of his beloved island awaiting him.

Like the old man, only when we let go of what we hold too tightly and reach out in love to what is right in front of us, will we find our happiness and our lives. Joseph Campbell said, “We must be willing to let go of the life we’ve planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.” The phrase that I’d like us to hold on to is “We must be willing…” We all have things to let go. The hard part is our willingness to let these things go. At different times in our lives we may have to learn to let go of relationships, loved ones, a way of thinking, our pride, and material possessions. Take a moment to think about something you’re holding on to that you should probably let go.

I wonder if you felt anxiety or resistance to think of letting go of something. It’s difficult for us. It’s much easier for us to think of something someone else should let go of. In my house I always tell people what they should get rid of. Richard’s closet, for example, makes me anxious. He loves clothes and adds, and adds, and adds. I’m constantly telling him, “If you put three things in, three things must come out.” But he doesn’t listen. I know you’re feeling sympathy for me right now. I hope you never have to live like this. While I’m monitoring Richard’s closet I’m forgetting to look at my shoe collection, or the four drawers around the house that I store complete crap in. You’ll never know when you need it. This is a good example of how I distract myself from thinking about letting go. We all do it. It’s easier then facing our own truth. Like Gloria Steinem once said, “The truth will set you free, but first it pisses you off.”

Letting go can challenge us on many different levels. Unitarian minister Carole Freedman writes, “There are times that we may hold on to a disagreement or a disturbing episode, such as a rude driver or someone who hurt our feelings unwittingly. For those instances, we may simply need to take pause – breathe deeply and tell ourselves either silently or out loud – “let it go.” We all have things in our lives that we hold on to. In Buddhism, they are taught to let go of worldly possessions and to focus on the meaning of existence and our relationship to those around us. I’m not professing that you should all run home and take everything you own and give it to Goodwill or the homeless shelter, but I do believe that learning to put things into perspective can derive a much greater sense of satisfaction and peace than we currently have. I often wonder if my paternal grandmother realized she was practicing Buddhism. As long as I can remember she had let go of expectation or trying to control the outcome. She simply lived and let things come and go. She let go of attachments and focused on living and loving, not unlike the author of our reading this morning.

While writing this sermon about letting go I realized that holding on must be a part of letting go. This morning’s sermon could have just as easily been titled *Holding On*, because both the process of letting go and holding on require us to evaluate the true value and reason for keeping things in our lives. Everyone here this morning is holding on to something emotionally or materially that they really don’t need - something that no longer serves them beneficially in any way shape or form. Perhaps one of the most important thoughts I can convey this morning is let go of all that is not life giving. Prioritize and reflect on what is truly meaningful and brings joy to your life. Hold on to that.

We often rationalize our behaviors and not acknowledge what it is that we would be best off to eliminate from our lives. Let me offer an example of what some people might view as acceptable behavior while others may recognize it as destructive. Perfectionism is a term that some people have used as if it were a self-aggrandizing form of braggadocio, but true perfectionism, as a personality trait, can be debilitating and self-limiting. A perfectionist personality trait may cause people to have high levels of stress and even anxiety attacks. It can lead a person to start projects and never finish them. The idea of completing something and it not being perfect is overwhelming to the perfectionist personality, and anything less than perfect is unacceptable, so better to leave a project unfinished than to complete it - not be perfect - and effectively fail. After all, is anything ever perfect? Isn’t there always something that can be done to make a project better, whether it is painting a room, building a shelving unit, preparing a meal, or writing a term paper? For those with a self-evaluating standard of perfectionism, the anxiety that develops from attempting to correct every little mistake or imperfection can be more than just frustrating, it can lead to depression, withdrawal and psychogenic illness. Where and why would someone develop such a disorder? Have any of you had, or known of someone who had a parent, guardian or spouse who was hyper-critical of virtually everything you did? They may have even had the best of intentions, hoping to point out what you did wrong on a project or assignment in school, how you made your bed, washed the dishes, folded your towels, washed the car or anything else. They may have thought that they were teaching you the BEST way to accomplish the task, and by pointing out what you did wrong, they were helping you to be the best you could be – equipping you with the knowledge or skills necessary to succeed in this world. What might have been missing, however, were the words of praise to point out what you did right or how well you accomplish some other task.

I wish I could tell you that letting go was a simple process, but for most of us it isn’t – if it were, then we would have already let go of our bad habits and destructive thoughts and memories. In the 1992 movie, *A League of Their Own*, about an all-woman’s baseball league formed during World War II, Geena Davis, portraying one of the stars of the team is talking to her manager, played by Tom Hanks, and she remarks during an intense practice session “This is hard – this is really, really hard.” Tom Hanks responds by saying “Of course it’s hard, it’s supposed to be hard. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it!” I love that line, because it applies to so many things in life. Life doesn’t have to be difficult, but the things that matter the most to us take work, and if we really want a change in our lives, it generally requires hard work.

American Rabbi and author Milton Steinberg wrote, “This then is the great truth of human existence. One must not hold life too precious. One must always be prepared to let it go.” And American poet Mary Oliver wrote that “to live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.”

May it be so.