

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA; September 4, 2022

This is one of those passages that makes me feel a bit sheepish when I have to say, “The Gospel of the Lord.” It seems so stark in contrast to so much of what we hear and repeat about Jesus. How is it that we are supposed to make sense of this seemingly impossible demand? The idea of giving up all my possessions is a challenge enough and, seriously—all jokes about my sisters aside—the idea of having to hate family in order to follow this one just seems like an odd contradiction to the love we are so used to seeing and emphasizing. It’s the kind of passage that leads a preacher to procrastinate and blather about how strange it is for the first few minutes.

We really aren’t very good at letting go, are we? We’re just don’t seem to be made for it. Even a baby, on the day it is born, will close its hand around your finger. In fact when I do *this* (grasping) neurons fire in my brain; the very same neurons that fired when you watched me do *this*. From day one, we know how to grasp and hold. It’s so deeply rooted in who we are that’s hard for us to imagine any other possibility. When I’ve preached these sorts of texts in the past, I’ve always said that that’s point—that these texts tell us how impossible this commandment is! Jesus tells us something we can’t follow and we’re reminded how much we need God’s grace! See!? I don’t have to

give away my possessions and that's the whole point! I get to keep it all....

One time after giving a version of that sermon, a parishioner caught me on the way out. "But pastor, some people do give up all their possessions."

"Well Dave we really can't, can we?" I answered him, sheepishly, and maybe trying to dodge.

"But some people do."

Sometime later I was talking about this dynamic with a spiritual advisor. I left out the part when my parishioner had thrown a dart straight into my understanding of this passage, but I wasn't shy about saying that I didn't understand it.

"Well, what would happen if you did give up all your possessions?" she asked. "How would you feel?"

"I suppose I'd miss them. I'd feel loss." And then some silence. "And some strange sense of pride, I guess, that I'd managed something so hard, something so many other people couldn't do."

And she gave me one of those looks that told me that I'd said something much more important than I'd realized.

How much hurt and harm is caused by our need to grasp and hold on, to take for ourselves and keep from other people? Yes, part of it is about money and things. Our habits of grasping and holding leave others with too little. When we are asked to choose between life and

death, between ease and hardship, the choice is too easily life for me and hardship for others, and well that's just the way the world works, isn't it? Yes, part of it is about money and things, but it's not quite as simple as that. It's more than that. It's about our need to have what the other doesn't, to be what the other isn't. To choose for me.

We grasp and hold so easily that even if I gave away all my possessions, I would seek to possess that I had no possessions. "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

Moses is speaking to the people of Israel as they are about to enter the land. "How shall you live with one another? What choices will you make? The commandments of God are for your good, for your life!" Of course we know how that story goes. We know how it goes because that is our story. But there is one who enters into our story and chooses for us. This one obeys the commandments and finds himself on a cross. This one chooses death, goes to a death willingly, and chooses life for us.

In life and teaching of Jesus, and in the cross, we see one who is trying to loosen our grip, to open our grasping hands. "You do not need to hold onto your possessions because you already have the entire Kingdom of God!"

“You don’t need to be big to be important; it is the little seeds and yeast and the salt that God uses to bring goodness to the world!”

“You don’t need to have what others don’t, to be what they are not, because you are already everything you need to be, Child of God.”

This is the one who chose life for all, and in so doing was raised, raised to life that we might have new life. And in this new life we don’t need to hold and grasp and keep. We don’t need to choose some over others or place ourselves over others.

To love father and mother and family isn’t a bad thing. Of course not. But we so often fail to see that love isn’t a finite resource. Loving many does not mean loving any any less.

You know that little trick about neurons I mentioned earlier works the other way, too. Because when we see someone opening their arms, the same parts of our brain fire as well. As we come week after week, as we see this one open his arms for us and for our neighbors, we learn, little by little, that we too can let go.

In this new life, we are freed to let go of our grasping and holding, to choose life not *for me* but *for us*.

Amen.