

“Hold On to What Is Good”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

6 November 2016

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

If I’m not mistaken,
there seems to be a built-in bias in our language
about the concepts of holding on and letting go.

While it’s possible to hold on to both good things and bad,
or to let go of both,
it seems that letting go is the concept
generally seen in a more positive light.

It’s more common that we associate letting go with freedom,
with liberating ourselves from whatever it is that binds us,
that ties us down, that, well, holds us back.

When we think of someone holding on,
we likely conjure an image of a person clinging desperately
to something that’s slipping from their grasp—
be it a relationship, their job, or life itself.

In many ways, letting go and holding on
are different sides of the same coin.

We have to let go of something in order to hold on.
We have to hold on to something in order to let go.

This month’s *New Horizons*, exploring our theme of letting go,
invites us to consider life on the high trapeze.

As a metaphor, we can all likely relate to those moments
when we’ve had to let go of one trapeze bar,
in order to take hold of the one swinging toward us.

Or we may recall those moments

when we held tight to the bar in our hands,
rather than risking the leap of faith required
to grab the next trapeze swinging our way.

Holding on. Letting go.
Letting go. Holding on.

While there is much to be said for letting go,
for embracing opportunity or the next new thing,
there's also something to be said for holding on,
for sticking with something,
for deepening our commitment or our resolve,
for saving what is precious,
for doing what is noble,
for protecting what is true or just.

We can hold on to something out of love or out of fear,
out of habit or out of a deep wisdom
gained through past mistakes.

And, as on the trapeze, timing is everything.

We're not always ready to make the leaps life requires.
Now isn't always the right time to release our grip.

We may well need the connection, the security,
the certainty of something that we're just not ready to let go of.

And so we hold on.

The poet Nancy Wood says we should, "hold on to what is good."

It's actually a line lifted from the Apostle Paul
in his letter to the Thessalonians.¹

From either source, it's sound advice.

"Hold on to what is good."

¹ *Thessalonians* 5:21.

But what is good? When should we hold on?
And when would we do well to let go?

Whether you realize it or not, over the past year,
you've probably seen Marie Kondo's book,
*The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up:
The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organising.*

The book has been everywhere.
It's been at the cash at Indigo for months.
I've even seen it for sale at the grocery store and at Shopper's.

Her book has been a big hit the world over
because she offers a clear, concise answer
about what to hold on to:
that which brings you joy, or is a genuine necessity.

Everything else is clutter, and it needs to go.

Whatever doesn't "spark joy" in us,
should be ceremonially touched, thanked,
and then sent on its way to a better home,
ideally where it might bring joy to someone else.

Her book has become an international best-seller, I suspect,
because it promises peace and well-being,
and offers a simple, if brutal method to get there.

Hold on to what brings joy, or what you truly need,
and let go of all the rest.

Years ago, I heard Cheryl Richardson, a big-name life coach,
have a powerful discussion with a woman about clutter.

The woman explained she was burdened
by the heaps of stuff in her home.

Richardson asked her to describe what comprised her clutter.

She listened, at length, and then, quite astutely,
pointed out that much of the list was a litany of grief and loss.

The woman had listed her violin, her books, and her art supplies,
her old clothes that didn't fit anymore,
and tons of stuff she didn't even know why
she had bought in the first place.

As Richardson engaged the woman,
it became clear that so much of what she was holding on to
was the stuff of broken dreams or dreams deferred.

Aspirations to be a concert violinist and a great artist.
Hopes of losing enough weight to fit into her former wardrobe.
A fantasy that somehow a houseful of stuff
would help her feel whole,
would somehow make her life complete.

She had an awful lot to let go of.

She would have done well to give thought to Kondo's test—
to consider if what she had
truly brought her joy or was a real necessity.

There are, of course, many reasons we hold on—
to things, to people, to situations.

We can be motivated by love or loyalty.
A sense of duty or sacred obligation.

In these cases, hopefully, the holding on,
at least most of the time, brings some measure of joy.

But we can also hold on, we can get stuck,
because we carry guilt, or fear judgment,
or we're just sure we'd die of embarrassment if we were to let go.

Rarely is there much joy, or even necessity, in such situations.

Whenever that is the case, we need to ask ourselves
what our holding, what our clinging, is really all about.

The test I try to use—beyond questions of joy and utility—

is this: “does this serve life?”

Does it help make the world a better place?
Does it bring more peace, or greater well-being?
Is it about love in some vital way?

Is my hanging on serving life?

A story. A fable, actually.²

Once, there was a man who was wrestling with his own thoughts,
about his life and the choices he was facing.

On a moonlit night, in a world of his own,
he starts crossing a bridge.

Out of the corner of his eye,
he sees a stranger,
dressed much like himself coming towards him.

He thinks the man approaching
is putting his hand out to greet him.

But, instead, the stranger has the end of a rope in his hand,
with the other end entwined all around him.

The stranger asks the man to hold the end of the rope.

While baffled by it all, he agrees.

The stranger tells the man to hold on tight, with two hands,
and then promptly jumps off the bridge
toward the swift running river down below.

“Hold on” the stranger cries as he falls.

When the stranger reached the rope’s full length,
the man on the bridge felt a hard and abrupt pull.

² “The Fable of the Bridge” by Edwin Friedman, from *Friedman’s Fables*.

He held tight despite being almost pulled over the side of the bridge.

Peering down at the stranger,
the man yelled, “What are you trying to do?”

“Just hold tight,” said the man dangling down below.

The man up top tried to haul the stranger up
but he couldn’t manage it.

He couldn’t get enough leverage.
His strength was almost perfectly counterbalanced
by the other man’s weight.

“Why did you do this?” the man on the bridge called out.

“Remember,” said the stranger, “if you let go, I’ll be lost.”

“But I can’t pull you up,” the man cried.

“I am your responsibility, though” said the stranger.

“Well, I didn’t ask for [this],” the man said.

“If you let go, I’m lost,” repeated the man down below.

The man on the bridge looked around for help.
He tried to come up with a plan,
but could not think of anything that would work.

He waited for someone to come and help pull the stranger up,
but no one came.

Fearing his arms could not hold out much longer,
he tied the rope around his waist.

“Why did you do this?” he asked again of the man below.
“Don’t you see what you have done?
What possible purpose could you have had in mind?”

“Just remember,” said the stranger, “my life is in your hands.”

Time passed.
The man couldn't hold on much longer.
A decision needed to be made.

In that moment, a thought occurred to the man on the bridge.

If the stranger hauled himself up
and he kept the end steady and pulled a bit,
together they could get him back to safety.

But, upon hearing it, the stranger wasn't at all interested in this plan.

"What do you mean you won't help?
I told you already I can't pull you up all by myself,
and I can't hang on much longer either."

"You have to try," the other man shouted back in tears.
"If you let go, I'll die."

The point of decision had arrived.

The man said to the other, "Listen to me.
I won't accept the position you've put me in."

"I'm not responsible for the choice for your life, only for my own;
the responsibility for the choice for your own life,
I hereby give back to you."

"What do you mean?" the stranger asked, clearly afraid.

"I mean, quite simply, it's up to you.
You decide which way this ends.
I will help you, if you help yourself."

"You can't mean what you say," the stranger shrieked.
"You wouldn't be so selfish.
I'm your responsibility.
What could be so important
that you would let someone die?
Don't do this to me."

The man atop the bridge waited a moment.

There was no change in the tension of the rope.

“Well, I accept your choice,” the man said, at last,
and then freed his hands.

This is not an easy story.
It’s not meant to be.

It comes from *Friedman’s Fables*,
a collection of parables meant to help readers wrestle
with family systems and group dynamics.

Did the man on the bridge do the right thing?

Was he his brother’s keeper?

Was he responsible for the other man’s life,
even when the stranger refused to be responsible for his own?

Should he have held on longer?
If so, how much longer?
And to what end?

How would you have handled the situation differently?
How would you have convinced the man to behave in a different way?

The fable raises ethical questions about the limits of responsibility,
about boundaries, self-differentiation, and self-preservation,
about holding on, and about letting go.

How does this story apply to your life—
to your life at work or at home,
to your relationship with family or with friends?

Which person are you?
Or are you, perhaps, the rope or the bridge?

This story can be read as not being about two people,

but as a story about a single person—about an internal struggle.
About an inner conflict over whether to hold on or let go.

The poet Mary Oliver says:

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.³

She speaks of letting go, but also of holding on.
To “love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it...”

This is the true work of any life.

No matter what we have,
no matter the clutter we collect about us,
there will come a time when we will relinquish it all,
one way or another.

In the meantime, every act of letting go is a way to practise—
to practise the art of holding close to our hearts what is mortal, what is good,
and then, in time, letting it go.

May we practise, until practice makes perfect,
the art of holding on to that which is necessary,
that which brings joy, that which serves and sustains life.

May we practise this sacred art,

³ Mary Oliver, from “In Blackwater Woods”

that we might master the art of living,
even as we prepare, in the end, to let it all go.

Amen.

Closing Words

Nancy Wood

Hold on to what is good
even if it is
a handful of earth.

Hold on to what you believe
even if it is
a tree which stands by itself.

Hold on to what you must do
even if it is
a long way from here.

Hold on to life even when
it is easier letting go. . . .

Blessed Be.