

Some years ago, I heard this story told to a group of teenagers. I'm not sure they understood it.

*Two traveling monks reached a town where there was a young woman waiting to step out of her sedan chair. The rains had made deep puddles and she couldn't step across without spoiling her silken robes. She stood there, looking very cross and impatient. She was scolding her attendants. They had nowhere to place the packages they held for her, so they couldn't help her across the puddle.*

*The younger monk noticed the woman, said nothing, and walked by. The older monk quickly picked her up and put her on his back, transported her across the water, and put her down on the other side. She didn't thank the older monk, she just shoved him out of the way and departed. As they continued on their way, the young monk was brooding and preoccupied. After several hours, unable to hold his silence, he spoke out. "That woman back there was very selfish and rude, but you picked her up on your back and carried her! Then she didn't even thank you!*

*"I set the woman down hours ago," the older monk replied. "Why are you still carrying her?"*<sup>1</sup>

Now that those teenagers are adults, I'm confident, if they remember it, they understand the moral all too well: that the ability to let go of something – to just let go – is a virtue of enlightenment well-worth pursuing, even if its path can be both long and brooding.

But I think the fallacy we are often fed, even perhaps in this wonderful little tale, is that as we get older we become more calculating and pragmatic, more reasonable and measured, and thus, by proxy, less impulsive and emotional, so that the things that used to get to us when we were younger simply don't anymore. That as we age, it all just becomes easier to swallow --- it all becomes easier to just let go and move on, and especially so from the small things, like a stranger's rudeness from atop a sedan chair, or perhaps more recognizably, like a middle finger from the window of passing Jaguar or BMW. And while that ought to be true, and while perhaps it is true for several of us here, moving on isn't always that easy, even for those of us who are quite old indeed.

For as older people, as adults, we are also filled with just so much more baggage than when we were just starting out. We have been aged so resolutely by the routine of time that releasing ourselves from old habits and bad influences is like a new language we simply cannot learn. For with added experience has also come added bias, and a stubbornness to be swayed from our opinions, no matter their illness, no matter their error. Moreover, we also just have so much more stuff now, and so much more invested in that stuff, that simply letting go and divorcing ourselves from it all, or even just some portion of it, like a job or even a house, can be impossible to imagine or really, just very hard to pull off. Even for the almighty pragmatist here among us (you know who you are), who after calculating for X and Y such that the solution to your life couldn't be any more plain, you might yet decide it not even worth the hassle to solve the problem. For it's probably not worth the trial, and the pain to let go, to separate, move on, and start again.

I should say right now that in no way is this meant to be taken as a defense of the Brexit vote, celebrating the UK's choice to take on the hassle by separating from the EU – the preceding section of this sermon was written before that fateful outcome – nor is it meant to be a blanket statement, arming us with an excuse to run away from a task, an obligation, or a vow at the first signs of trouble and hardship. More simply, my intent is to explore, just a little, into why letting go can be so difficult; and to affirm when moving on might be necessary for our own well-being and the well-being of others.

And our Old Testament text seems to understand all of this really well and at a very human level. For here we have Elisha, following every motion, every footstep, every movement of his mentor Elijah. Wherever Elijah goes, Elisha follows, even when he is explicitly told not to and to stay behind somewhere else. He simply cannot let go, even though the very prophet of the Most High God is commanding him to do just that. My friends, letting go sure is hard!

Now, for some reason, the lectionary wanted us to omit the middle verses (3-5) where the narrative is replicated and repeated twice over. But it's precisely through that repetition, in Elisha saying over and again "I will not leave you!" that the point is hammered home: letting go is hard! Three separate times Elisha doesn't follow orders. It is only when the choice is taken out of his hands, when the chariots of fire descend and Elijah whisked away in a whirlwind, that Elisha is forced to release his grip. Consequently, it is only when he is made to let go that he finally is able to move on and encounter the life waiting for him, as successor to Elijah and leader of the people. My friends, sometimes, we just have to step back and relinquish. Otherwise, our dreams and our destinies may never be realized. Otherwise our lives might never truly begin.

Edwin Friedman, rabbi and philosopher, articulates all of this better than I ever could in his short story, *The Bridge*. It goes like this:

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<sup>1</sup> By Jon J. Muth from his book: "Zen Shorts."

*There was a man who had given much thought to what he wanted from life. He had experimented with different ways of living, and he had had his share of both success and failure. At last, he began to see clearly where he wanted to go. Diligently, he searched for the right opportunity. Sometimes he came close, only to be pushed away. Often he applied all his strength and imagination, only to find the path hopelessly blocked. And then at last it came. But the opportunity would not wait. It would be made available only for a short time. If it were seen that he was not committed, the opportunity would not come again. Eager to arrive, he started on his journey. Hurrying along, he came upon a bridge that crossed through the middle of a town. It had been built high above a river in order to protect it from the floods of spring. He started across.*

*Then he noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. As they moved closer, it seemed as though the other were coming to greet him. When they were within hailing distance, he could see that the other had about his waist a rope. The other began to uncurl the rope, and, just as they were coming close, the stranger said, "Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end a moment?" Surprised by this politely phrased but curious request, he agreed without a thought, reached out, and took it. "Thank you," said the other, who then added, "two hands now, and remember, hold tight." Whereupon, the other jumped off the bridge.*

*Quickly, the free-falling body hurtled the distance of the rope's length, and from the bridge the man abruptly felt the pull. Instinctively, he held tight and was almost dragged over the side. He managed to brace himself against the edge, however, and after having caught his breath, looked down at the other dangling, close to oblivion.*

*"What are you trying to do?" he yelled. "Just hold tight," said the other. "But I cannot pull you up," the man cried.*

*"I am your responsibility," said the other. "Well, I did not ask for it," the man said. "If you let go, I am lost," repeated the other.*

*He began to look around for help. But there was no one. Why did this happen to befall him now, just as he was on the verge of life?*

*"What do you want?" he asked the other hanging below.*

*"Just your help," the other answered.*

*"How can I help? I cannot pull you in myself."*

*"I know that. Just hang on; that will be enough. My life is in your hands."*

*What should he do? He thought: "If I let go, all my life I will know that I let this other die. If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward my own long-sought-after salvation." As time went by, still no one came. And then a new thought occurred to him. "Now listen," he shouted down. "I think I know how to save you." But the other wasn't interested.*

*The point of decision arrived. "My life or this other's?" And then a new idea. A revelation. So new, in fact, it seemed heretical, so alien was it to his traditional way of thinking. "I want you to listen carefully," he said, "because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life I hereby give back to you."*

*"What do you mean?" the other asked, afraid. "I mean, simply, it's up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug a little from here." He began unwinding the rope from around his waist and braced himself anew against the side. "You cannot mean what you say," the other shrieked. "You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me."*

*He waited a moment. There was no change in the tension of the rope. "I accept your choice," he said, and freed his hands.*

Now maybe your first reaction to this story, and in particular, the shocking and immediate ending went something like: "Wow! "But he put his own life before another, how selfish of him, how un-Christ-like!" Honestly, I think my first reaction was kind of like: "That's awesome! Good for him! I wish I could do that sometimes and with certain people!" Unlike Elisha who needed an act from God to finally move on, this man chose by himself to let go. Choosing for himself to reclaim and begin his life anew. And really, that's not so un-Christ-like after all.

For in our New Testament text, Jesus says "Let the dead bury the dead." He tells another to skip out on saying farewell to his family before leaving everything and following him. Though Jesus' words might at first seem harsh, in the scope of our sermon, they are anything but that. In fact, they are life-giving! Like one of the central themes in our story (and as Harry Spaeth correctly identified in Bible Study), Jesus himself was running out of time. His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension were soon to come, and there was no time to dilly-dally. Let the dead bury the dead, he says. Choose me. Choose opportunity. Choose life, he says. Stop holding onto the ropes of others, especially those who are the anchors of your life, especially those who are nothing but dead weight holding you down.

And you know what, I can also imagine Jesus saying that certain people are simply beyond your help. That you are not the answer to all of the world's problems or even to just one person's every problem. Yes, you are to help those in need. Yes, you are to respond to those in crisis. Yes, you are to be a light in this world shrouded in darkness. But you are also not God. Sometimes it's best for you, and for everyone else involved, if you just let go and move on. After all, Christ himself once taught that if others aren't willing to welcome you in peace, then shake the dust off your feet and leave town (Matthew 10:14).

My friends, the sermon this morning is for those of you who have been holding too long of a rope for too long of a time. For those of you raised in families where you and you alone have been responsible for everyone's happiness. For those of you in marriages where you and you alone are tasked with keeping it all together. For those of you in friendships where you and you alone are the listener and the care-giver. Even for those of you in this very church where you and you alone have been a leader, pulling everyone else's weight. My friends, I say, sometimes it's okay to let go. Sometimes you need to let go and transition. Because sometimes you can't and you shouldn't do it all. Sometimes you can't and shouldn't pick up that phone. Sometimes you can't and you shouldn't make that drive. Sometimes you need to just be taken up and away in a whirlwind so to speak, and let everyone else figure it out for themselves. Sometimes you need to just put your trust in God and move on. Because otherwise you risk enabling. Because otherwise you risk progress. Because otherwise you risk even life itself.

Now having said all that, I personally know that's easier said than done. I also know just how scary it can be to actually follow through on it. I do. Especially when the person you've been holding onto is so fragile. Especially when it's been someone you've loved for so long. I had a friend named \_\_\_\_\_ who just couldn't get his life on track. Drugs, violence, depression, you name it. We did everything for him. One of our friends paid his way into rehab, twice. Another had him stay with him and his wife in their living room in this tiny little apartment. Another talked to him every single night, no matter the time or the disturbance. But at a certain point, he simply couldn't be our responsibility any longer... we had to let go and move on. And hear the good news! He's fine now!

And though that outcome won't always be true for everyone... my friends, certain people and certain things can't always be your responsibility and yours alone. At some point people need to become accountable to themselves. At some point, you are allowed your life.

And that's Biblical. And that's Christ-like. Indeed, that's the greatest gift of God's creation.

Amen.