

**Why is it so hard to let go?**  
**#1 in a sermon series on Life's Unanswered Questions**  
**Sunday, February 5, 2012**  
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This month our theme is Life's Unanswered Questions. As with many of our themes, the topics for these sermons came from your requests. I asked our deacons and members of the church to send me ideas. Many of you did. It was interesting to notice how many of your ideas converged on similar topics. We hope that series addresses some of the central perplexities of faith. I have hopes that this series will deepen our faith. Faith really grows more from the questions we wrestle over time. Faith also grows in churches like ours when people engage in an open-ended conversation about their questions about God.

Today's topic is entitled - "Why is it so hard to let go?" Holding on and letting go is part of the human journey. From the time when you are so young that you need a hand to help you walk until you reach the time in later years when you need a hand to help your balance, - life is full of moments when we have to learn when to hold tight and how to let go. Holding on and letting go is a balance throughout our lives. Sometimes it flows; other times it is like ripping a bandaid off or pulling at stitches. Sometimes we know instinctively how to reach out with open arms that convey freedom in their embrace. Other times we hold onto people so tightly that we crush the fullness of our affection inadvertently. Sometimes we live with a sense of adventure and thrive in new situations. At other times we grow anxious about details and can't let go of our need to control. Sometimes we are open to new possibilities; but other times we are bonded to our expectations.

There are many Bible stories about how hard it is to let go. But few illustrate this phenomenon better than the one we just read in II Kings. The story of Naaman tells about a commander in the Syrian Army, 2800 years ago. Syria was also in the news - but they ruled the Middle East. Naaman was the commander of the king's army. Though he was powerful physically, intellectually, politically, he also suffered from a terrible disease. He had leprosy. The story of his healing has a lot to teach us about how hard it is to let go, in our lives too.

IN THE FIRST PLACE, IT IS HARD TO LET GO OF OUR EXPECTATIONS. In this story Naaman worked hard. He was at the top of his class at the military academy. He trained to be an officer. We can assume he was courageous and disciplined, strong and loyal, responsible, and smart. He had earned the respect of his troops, the other officers, and one of the most powerful rulers of the world.

He was used to commanding a certain respect. he had earned it and fully expected it. So when he went to Israel to ask the prophet Elisha for help with his leprosy he expected Elisha to come out of his house- at the very least.

- He had every right to expect that people in Israel would take him seriously.
- He had every right to expect that they would be impressed by his power, and sympathetic to his plight.
- He had brought a fortune to pay for this cure- because it meant the world to him to be better. When he pulled up in front of Elisha's small cottage in the country, he had every right to expect to be noticed. He expected a little cow-towing.

When no one was impressed, he was baffled, and then furious. He did not know anything about Israel. So he expected it to be like Syria.

When they told him to wash in the River Jordan - he had enough. The first time I went to Israel I had such high expectation for the River Jordan. by that time I could not count how many sermons I had preached about this river. in my mind it was bigger than the Mississippi, more powerful than the Thames, more interesting than the Seine. It was the place where God called Jesus to ministry.

When we got off the van the day of our visit, we were in the middle of a patch of desert. Tumble weed and grasses mingled unheralded in the breeze. The guide explained as we descended in to the river bed that the river bed had moved over the century. He showed several places where Jesus might have been baptized. As I hiked toward the river my excitement only grew. Finally we reached it - the mighty Jordan. My eyes squinted as I looked in disbelief. I had seen rivers in the Ozarks much grander. Had it dried up over time? Or was it always a meandering muddy creek - made grand by artists and prophets' tales?

Naaman must have thought the same thing. This river is somehow efficacious. "We have rivers in Damascus which are so much more important than this creek." For a moment Naaman almost walked away from the thing he wanted most, because he could not let go of his expectations.

The funny thing about expectations is that they take on a life of their own. You plan to marry Robert Redford or Catherine DeNeuve, or Whoopi Goldberg; But you end up with George the plumber, or Kate the accountant. Hopefully your expectations - your absurd expectations fed by fantasy and Hollywood -

don't prevent you from being whole and happy, and having the life God wants for you, because your expectations get in the way.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, the story says to let go of your pride. Naaman's pride was wounded. Every detail of this story eats at Naaman's pride:

1. He is a commander but he suffers from a disease that attacks your body and your pride. He was ashamed to have this disease. He could not hide it. his body was diseased in a way everyone could see.

2. His wife's maid knew a healer. This powerful man was so vulnerable that he had to listen to his wife's maid- who pitied him. She a spoil of war- herself, knew someone in her vanquished region of the outback - someone who might help.

3. Naaman was so desperate he had to try it.

4. The king treats the excursion like a diplomatic venture. Naaman goes to Israel with a letter to the king, and impressive gifts. When they pull up in front of Elisha's grass hut, with all the splendor of a Hollywood motorcade, the simple prophet does bother to come out. He sends his valet to give the commander a prescription for aspirin.

The story is about a wise man who is foolish because he cannot get out of his own way - his pride is hurt to badly. Naaman's servants- who have not been to school and never eat with the king or hob-knob at the court are much better to see his best options. They are not hampered by pride.

We all need self-respect, but pride make you the fool.

FINALLY - THE STORY TELLS US WE NEED TO LEARN WHEN TO LET GO OF OUR CONTROL.

Naaman was successful because he controlled his troops. He needed to. it was self-control that propelled him to such great success. There are times when control is exactly what we need. But Naaman had so little control over his health. He realized in this story, that for all his control, he had a lot less control than he realized.

There is a Jewish mystical principle about control. Originally everything was God. God filled the universe. But in order for anything else to exist in the world God had to retreat a bit. God stayed close but God saw the job of withdrawing as a divine mission. So when the people were trapped - slaves in Egypt, God parted the waters. When they travelled through the wilderness God sent manna. and quail, and helped Moses find water. it was daily interaction that got them through that crisis. "God was a day by day,

sometimes minute by minute miracle maker" (Mogel, Wendy "The Blessing of a Skinner Knee" New York: Penguin 2001, p. 92 discussed this idea; and I owe it to Dr. Mogel).

Over time, "God withdrew and made fewer miracles. As we matured...God withdrew....Left to our own devices we humans took lots of false steps, but we learned from our mistakes and became a more resilient people...Like God, new parents are miracle makers. We need to monitor everything... but as they mature, we need to withdraw from smoothing their path...this is the only way children will mature into self-reliant adults."

We learn to face our own lack of control when we raise children- because the whole exercise is raising them to leave us. We learn about our lack of control as we watch our parents age. We learn how little control we have when someone we love is seriously ill.

This story of Naaman's healing is a story of many miracles. Right at the top of the list is the miracle that happened when Naaman let go, and let God change his life.

When I stood next to the Jordan River I was disappointed. I had come a long way - on many levels to get to this place. I wanted it to be grand. But because I had such hopes for this river I went through the motions. I stood there as though the river was grand. I prayed. I scooped up a little to take home. I made an effort to listen to God's voice. When it was time to leave I was struggling not to be disappointed.

A quarter of a mile from the river there was a beautiful orthodox chapel, small and seemingly in the middle of nowhere. On our way back to the van, we stopped to see its magnificent murals- resplendent in primary colors that seemed to have kept their vibrant hue in the dry desert air. We enjoyed this place and as we were leaving three doves took flight right over our heads. The monk who tends the chapel keeps them. I know I was probably grasping for straws that morning, but the doves were so beautiful, and unexpected. Symbols of the Holy Spirit, in scripture, somehow they reminded me of how God is closest when we struggle to let go. Somehow these birds that were taking wings and flying so beautifully, came to remind me that all through life holding on and letting go is such a delicate and sacred dance.

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