

The 12 Steps of Spiritual Recovery
Part 3 - Deciding to Let Go

Mark 8:31-38

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ June 26, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,[a] will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words[b] in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:31-38 NRSV)

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I can be a very indecisive person. You should see what I am like when deciding on a restaurant or movie with a friend. What would you like to see? I don't know, what would you like? Where would you like to eat? I don't know, what would you like? Back and forth back and forth—until we should probably just flip a coin.

You see, deciding things can be hard, because there is always a risk there are always consequences, even in the smallest decisions. What if my moviegoing partner hates the movie I choose? How will she then feel about me? What if my dinner companion doesn't like his or her meal? Will the night be ruined? Just imagine what I must be like with bigger decisions! I can drive people nuts!

So when I come to the third step in the Twelve Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous (and many other programs) I don't exactly jump for joy. Listen to what Step 3 says we are to do:

“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”¹

Make a decision! Ugh! Now this is getting serious...

Remember the learning from the first 2 steps we have already talked about (these are not exact quotes): In Step 1 we recognizing our powerlessness over our addiction. In other words, we look to see and name our sin & brokenness. In Step 2 we coming to believe a power greater than ourselves could restore our health. In other words, we start believing in that power. So Step 3 is making a decision to give our lives to that power - to God.

¹The Twelves Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-121_en.pdf,

There is a logical progression here: We see our addiction, we believe in God's power, we give ourselves wholly into the hands of that power, that God.

Now before we get much further, I'd like to invite you to look at Mark 8:31-38, because I think it has direct relevance to this process. In a way, this passage fleshes out the heart of Step 3 of the 12 Steps. It gives us a critical understanding of how we are to live and what (and who) we live for. It corrects our mistaken notions of life. On the surface, it is a story about Jesus, a story about his followers. But it is also, quite powerfully, it is a story about us.

This passage stands at the center of Mark's gospel and by setting it there, the author, Mark, is giving us a clue to how important this story is. Putting it right smack dab in the middle, Mark is telling us to—pay attention! This is important stuff!

The story that you heard read recounts the well known story of Jesus' telling Peter to "get behind me, Satan," and is followed by some challenging teaching on discipleship, on what it really means to follow Jesus. The passage marks a turning point in the gospel. Up to this point Jesus was seen as a leader with power and authority—but now Jesus is said to be a Messiah whose work would be characterized by suffering, death, and only then then resurrection.

You could say that this story has everything to do with how we understand Jesus, how we understand God, how we understand ourselves. Verse 31 points clearly to a change in perspective:

Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...²

Up until this point, Jesus followers saw him as a man of action. A man of bold words. A leader who challenged religious norms. A healer who saved people from dire conditions. A prophet who challenged the status quo. A man of compassion who fed the hungry. Someone who loved beyond normal boundaries. But here Jesus starts talking about his own "suffering and death." The ultimate letting go. Here Jesus tells his followers that this suffering MUST happen.

As you might expect, his friends did not just say, "Jesus, thanks for letting us know what is happening next, we hope that goes well in your ministry..." But what they did instead (as good friends might do) was to try to protect Jesus, to stand in the way of this fate. Speaking for all the other disciples, Peter "rebukes" Jesus. He acts like a parent who is scolding a child. But Jesus looks at Peter and the rest of the disciples and offers his own rebuke. We hear these familiar words, "Get behind me Satan!"³ In these words, it is not that Peter was being branded as evil, but more that he was being accused of being a tempter, someone who would be standing in the way of what God wanted for Jesus.

Jesus was and is a person of power and authority, but in this instance, he is beginning to set his mind toward the reality which he knew lay before him, that he would suffer and be executed. Jesus was beginning to let go. He made a decision to not avoid the pain and suffering, and death he could see ahead, but to fall into the hands of God.

The apostle Paul reminds us of this reality in his letter to the Philippians when he says:

*[Jesus], though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,*

² Mark 8:31, *NRSV*.

³ Mark 8:33, *NRSV*.

*taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.⁴*

He emptied himself. He let go of his power. He let go of control. One translation tells us, Jesus did not “regard equality a thing to be grasped.”⁵

And this is where things connect back to the Twelve Steps for me. Don’t many of us spend our lives grasping for power, grasping for control, desperately trying to make our world right? Don’t most of us expend huge efforts trying to get free of our pain? One writer, in a reflection called “He Only Lived to Drink,” describes how he began to use alcohol to manage his life:

I drank so much that night that nobody believed I hadn’t been drinking all the time, and I didn’t get drunk, although there were parts of the evening that I didn’t remember the next day. But more important than anything else that night, I belonged. I was at home in the universe; I was comfortable with people. Despite my active church and school life as a child, I had never felt really comfortable; I was actually very nervous and insecure around people and most of the time forced myself to be outgoing like my parents because I thought it was my duty. But this night in the bar was like no other time in my life. Not only was I completely at ease, but I actually loved all the strangers around me and they loved me in return, I thought, all because of this magic potion, alcohol. What a discovery. What a revelation!⁶

In what areas do I find my life unmanageable? In what areas do you find your life unmanageable? What is it we do to bring our lives under control? Where do you, where do I—go to find healing? Is there something I need to let go of to make that happen? Where do we need to stop our “grasping?”

In the very next few words of the scripture reading, we hear Jesus describe the life he is actually living out. As Jesus himself “lets go” into the life and reality that stands before him and he teaches his disciples to do the same. He gathers the crowd and his disciples around him and offers these words:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.⁷

These puzzling words are at the heart of Jesus’ message. These sayings are deeply authentic to the heart of Jesus. Deny yourself. Lose your life.

Why in the world would Jesus command this? Why would he offer this as the foundation of discipleship? Why would any of us give up control? Why would any of us let go of the life we cling to?

⁴ Philippians 2:6-8, *NRSV*.

⁵ Philippians 2:6, *New American Standard Bible, 1977*

⁶ Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 447, “He Only Lived to Drink,” http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_bigbook_personalstories_partIII.pdf

⁷ Mark 8:34-35, *NRSV*.

The reason is simple: Our control doesn't work. What we cling to is failing us. Or as Step 1 puts it "Our lives had become unmanageable." One person told his story this way in the Big Book of AA, in a section called "Acceptance Was the Answer":

For years I was sure the worst thing that could happen to a nice guy like me would be that I would turn out to be an alcoholic. Today I find it's the best thing that has ever happened to me. This proves I don't know what's good for me. And if I don't know what's good for me, then I don't know what's good or bad for you or for anyone.⁸

So we release that we might find ourselves in a better place. We give ourselves over to the God who knows what is good for us. We let go that we might be taken to a place of health and wholeness. We lose our life to save it.

But still, that release, that letting go is not enough, unless we trust that there is something, someone there to catch us. And for Christians that someone is the God we know in Christ. We decide to let go into the arms of the God of love. Richard Rohr puts it succinctly:

It is easy to surrender, it is easy to let go when you know that you are surrendering to love and mercy.⁹

St. Francis put it this way, "Love responds to Love alone."¹⁰ We have a God who is there to receive us, to heal us, to make us whole.

I want to show you my Father's Day gift. It is a print from an artist named Tali. Lena and I stumbled onto this in a restaurant in San Diego on Father's Day weekend. I immediately liked it, perhaps seeing it as a bit of a portrait of myself, and Lena bought it for me.

Can you see the resemblance? Here is a closer look. When looked at the painting closer, I noticed many words written around the margins. And one phrase really stood out to me - here is a closeup. Can you see it? The words say, "Save me from myself." Somehow the artist pierced right into my anguished soul. Save me from myself. This rings so true for me.

Just so you know, I do celebrate the goodness and beauty that lies within me. But I would be lying if I also didn't acknowledge the struggles and pain. And I don't know about you, but I have no antidote for those things. I need someone to save me from myself.

That is what Jesus is talking about here. It is the clear message he is giving his disciples. He is inviting us to let go. He is inviting us to relinquish control. He is asking us to decide to give every part of our lives into the hands of our God.

Don't be mistaken, he is not asking for sacrifice as a way of earning more brownie points from God. As a way of doing enough so that we "merit" God's grace. The self denial Jesus asks for is not one more form of "works righteousness." Again, Richard Rohr says it well when he talks about letting go as "surrender":

⁸ Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, pp., 417-418, "Acceptance Was The Answer," http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_bigbook_personalstories_partII.pdf

⁹ *Breathing Under Water; Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Richard Rohr, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Breathing Under Water; Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Richard Rohr, p. 28.

*Surrender in this sense is not so much 'giving up' as is 'giving to...'*¹¹

We might say it is...giving to (giving ourselves to) a person who can save us.” That person is the God we know in Christ.

In some ways, following Jesus makes no sense. It is not logical. We want to avoid pain. We want to live a healthy and meaningful life. And when things stand in our way, we think that exerting more control, we think that depending on our own power is what is called for. Yet the more control we exert, the harder it is. In the end, we find that we need to be saved from ourselves.

That is when Step 3 begins to ring true:

“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

We decide to turn our life over to God. Perhaps that is the key. Centuries ago, the apostle Paul reflected on this same reality:

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*¹²

Christ lives in me. Christ lives in you. For a Christian - that is the heart of surrender. That is what it means to let go. May God grant us all that courage. May God grant us all that faith.

Amen.

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¹¹ *Breathing Under Water; Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Richard Rohr, p. 18.

¹² Galatians 2:20, *NRSV*.

The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Think of some of the big decisions you have made in your life. Share one of those decisions that was hard for you. What made it so difficult? How did it turn out?
2. Read Mark 8:31-38 again. What strikes you here? What questions does this passage raise for you?
3. How does this passage shift the disciples' understanding of Jesus? How did they think about before the point when he began to talk about his suffering and death? Why do you think Peter "rebuked" Jesus?
4. What would make it easier for you to "let go" of control in your life? Have you ever been forced to let go of control in a life situation? What happened?
5. Jesus said, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Jim said in his sermon that this is central to Jesus' message, what in the world does Jesus mean by this?
6. Theologian Richard Rohr makes the comment: "The old ego will always prefer an economy of merit and sacrifice to an economy of grace and unearned loves, where we have no control." What is the difference between the "sacrifice of merit" we often practice and true "letting go?"
7. Can you ever think of a situation that you gave over control to another person? What about that person made you willing to give it over to him or her?
8. Is there a moment in your life when you feel you really gave your life into God's care? What was that like?

Table to Table Question
A question for kids and adults to answer together

Is it hard for you to let other people help you? Is it hard for you to let God help you?