

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JANUARY 16, 2011

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Scriptures: John 1:29-42; Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Cor. 1:1-9– also Acts 10:34-43

Learning to Let Go and Let God

Listen once again to John's words. John looks and sees Jesus coming down the road and he says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Those words of John's recognition of who Jesus really was are very important for us to understand because they help us to know who Jesus is, and they also show us something about who we are– Christians in an unchristian world.

John called Jesus the "Lamb of God," but what does that mean. Before Jesus entered human history, Jews were required to make animal sacrifices to atone for their sins. Blood sacrifices were needed for a short time in history preparing humankind for the ultimate sacrifice which only the Son of God could make. A lamb was a guiltless and gentle creature which symbolized a state of innocence. God revealed to John that Jesus would be called the "Lamb of God," and he would take away the sin of the world. Whereas in the Old Testament sacrifices had to be repeated over and over again, after Jesus' crucifixion there would no longer be a need for blood to be shed for the forgiveness of sin.

The symbolism would not be lost on those who listened to John's words. The lamb of the Passover was very familiar to them. When the Hebrew people were held in bondage in Egypt, God took pity on his people. Though the Pharaoh was given many chances to let the Hebrew people go, he refused and made everyone, including Egyptians suffer through a series of terrible plagues. The last plague was the angel of death which would strike down all the firstborn of those living in the land. The Hebrews were warned ahead of time and told to kill a perfect lamb, one without any

blemish. They were to spread the blood of the lamb on the doorpost of their houses. The angel of death would pass by the houses of those with blood on the doorposts. Thus God's people were spared the plague of the firstborn because of the blood of an innocent lamb. When John called Jesus the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world he was pointing the way to the purpose of the Messiah's coming.

We need to know who the Lamb of God is and why he is important for us. None of us has a need to find an animal to sacrifice for our sins, and it's a good thing too because most of us would find doing that several times a year to be quite a hardship. On the other hand, it is important for each of us to accept what Jesus did as the Lamb of God. He took away the work of trying to earn our salvation by our own power or might. There is no way that you or I can do it for ourselves. We cannot work ourselves into forgiveness and acceptance by God. Yet, that is where many people get hung up in their searching for faith and living the Christian life. They want to do it themselves. Sometimes, a person will even say that he resents the fact that Jesus died for him because he thinks he is able to take care of his own standing with God.

The truth is that you have to let God do things God's own way. None of us is capable of doing for ourselves what Jesus did. Isaiah 53:6 says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." God knows that we are like silly sheep wandering all over the place getting into mischief. We don't mean to, most of us. We try really hard, but we are all guilty in one way or the other. Great men and women of faith throughout the ages have wrestled with the problem of being good enough for God on their own, people like the apostle Paul, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and Charles Wesley. In the end they discovered that they had to let go and let God do it.

Think back to Jesus' baptism again. Why would Jesus have to be baptized?

He was the sinless Son of God. John did not feel worthy to baptize him, and it must have been a difficult thing for him to do. So, why was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized by John? Was it to show John's followers that there was someone greater than him, someone they should follow? Was it to show that John the Baptist had an important role to play in the beginning of the ministry of Jesus? Both of those might be valid reasons, but the main reason Jesus submitted to baptism by John was because it was the will of God the Father. Jesus allowed the will of God to be accomplished in his baptism, and God revealed his real presence was in the world in the person of the Son.

Jesus became the Lamb of God because of the Father's will. His humanity was evident in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed that if this cup could be taken from him, let it be so. But he had to go through with the work he had been set to do. So, Jesus the King of Heaven put himself aside and he took on himself all the sin of the world. What if God the Son had begun an argument with God the Father over the crucifixion plan? What if Jesus had tried to work out another way? Thanks be to God that our Lord Jesus Christ was himself obedient to his Father.

The pattern is there for us to follow, and we must follow it if we are to be able to live in this world. You cannot call yourselves Christians and keep on doing things the old way, or the way of most of the world, or **your** way. You must humble yourself in obedience to God and let your own way go bye-bye. In Philippians 2, Paul tells it like it is. The New Living Translation puts it this way:

"You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

6 Though he was God,
 he did not think of equality with God
 as something to cling to.

7 Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;

he took the humble position of a servant
and was born as a human being.

When he appeared in human form,

8 he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross."

There are some uncomfortable words in that passage, words that make us squirm a bit: humble, servant, obedience, and death. The truth, my friends, is that we have a choice.

Letting go and letting God means that you start from the beginning. **Number one:** You make Jesus Christ the Lord of your life and you live for him. More than that, it is changing the way you think of things. When you pray you should pray knowing that God is going to answer your prayer. If the answer is not what you wanted or expected, remember that God is working things out for your good— **in the long run**. You are only required to love God and to trust him. Letting go and letting God means having a thankful heart, thankful for all that God has done and is doing.

Number two: You have to stop telling other people what to do or not to do and concentrate on making yourself the Christian **you** should be. Trying to solve everyone's problems or trying to fix other people's lives is up to God. Let it go, God is perfectly able to carry on without you hard as that might be! This is not to say that Christians are not responsible for ministering to others. A kind word, a helping hand, a gift, a plate of cookies, a card, a listening ear are what Christianity is all about. Remember, there is a fine line between true concern and ordinary curiosity. Proverbs 11:25 says, "He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." When you let go of what you want and instead strive to bring refreshment to others, you will find that God is working out his will for you and for those to whom you minister. This has to do with judging too; judging who is worthy of your care, who is worthy of your help, putting

people you deem less worthy into categories. Let it go and let God to it. God is the judge of the hearts of all people including us. Our duty is to love our neighbor, whoever he may be.

Number three: There is so much in today's world to be stressed about. So many problems to be solved. Your parents' health is declining. Your children need financial help. You are afraid you are going to lose your job, or you already have. The news brings stories of devastating floods in Australia, mud slides in Brazil, shootings of innocent people in Arizona, Haiti still a mess a year later, a massacre of worshipping Christians in Egypt, and even a church that thinks it's God's will for them to protest something or other at the funeral of an innocent little nine-year-old year girl who was murdered. If you are like me, you have a hard time letting go of some of the stuff of the world. And I have my special "pastor stresses" like you have your own special stresses. You and I are in the same boat, and if we can't let go even a little bit and let God carry these things, then our boat is going to sink with us in it! After all, the Bible tells us that God is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work in us.

My last point, **number four:** Let go of all the old stuff, mostly let go of insisting on the old way of doing whatever it is, and having to have whatever it is be your way or the highway. There is always a different way. The old way may very well be the best way, but other people, especially younger people like to try new ways. You may think your way is the only way, but I can say without a doubt that there are other ways. It is so hard for us to give up the familiar, the way we were raised to do it, the way our mom or dad taught, whatever. Let me tell you the story of a man named Peter and a man named Cornelius. It is a wonderful story of letting go and letting God.

Peter was a man who found it hard to let go of the old ways. He was a very

faithful and committed Jew who followed Jesus and became a disciple and a believer. He carefully obeyed the laws of Judaism, including the dietary laws which forbid Jews from eating many different foods such as pork. There were other restrictions which Jews were supposed to follow, such as not associating with Gentiles.

We are so used to eating anything we want to eat that it is hard for us to imagine being told that we could not. But imagine this: What if on the next Communion Sunday instead of bread and wine or grape juice we instead passed around beer and pretzels. Would you be horrified? Would you protest that it was not the right thing to do, that it was unacceptable to God? Then you know how Peter felt. There has been a big uproar in the news recently about a commercial for Doritos that has been made for Super Bowl Sunday. It shows a minister or priest serving Doritos instead of the bread or Communion wafer. Yet, in other parts of the world I am sure that the bread is more like a tortilla or a pita or a rice cake or even a corn chip.

Getting back to Peter. One day God sent him a vision. The vision was of a large sheet being let down from heaven. In that sheet was every kind forbidden food, all the things which are listed in Leviticus 11. Some of those things were so awful that most of us would never think of eating them anyway. The Lord said, “Of the animals that move along the ground, these are unclean for you: the weasel, the rat, any kind of great lizard, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink and the chameleon. Of all those that move along the ground, these are unclean for you.” If I had been one of those Old Testament Jews, I would have said, “No problem, Lord, you don’t have to worry about me eating any of those unclean ground hugger animals, no sir, no way! But here’s the thing: God told Peter that he could go ahead and kill any of them and eat them. From then on nothing was unclean. Christians have been delivered from all the requirements of the Law. Through Christ Jesus they are set free.

Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing. He said, "No, Lord, I could never eat anything unclean. But the voice in the vision said to him, "What God has made clean you must not call unclean. He had to be told three times before he got the message, but that was typical for Peter. When Peter did get it, he really got it, even though his whole way of thinking and living was going to change forevermore. Jesus had done all that was necessary. The Lamb of God died to take away the sins of the world, all Peter, or any of us have to do, is let go and allow the work of Jesus be done in us for he has fulfilled the Law on our behalf. We cannot do it for ourselves.

Cornelius was a Gentile man who was respected by the Jews because he was a God-fearer, a person who believed in the Jewish God; but he was not circumcised and he did not observe Jewish dietary laws. Even though Cornelius was respected, Jews did not hang out with Gentiles, mainly because of the dietary restrictions. Cornelius also had a vision. An angel came into his room and told him to send for a man named Peter who was staying not far away. He did not understand why, but he sent some men to go get Peter. The men got there and told Peter that they were supposed to take him back to the house of Cornelius because Cornelius had had a vision. Peter put two and two together and figured out that the two visions must be connected.

So, Peter went to Cornelius' home and found the house full of people. He was really surprised, and the first words out of his mouth were, "You know it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with Gentiles?" I'm sure you could have heard a pin drop as the room became silent. Then Peter went on and the whole world stood still when he said that word, **But.....** But "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." Peter went on to preach one of his great sermons I'm sure. And soon the hearts of his listeners were moved by what he said. The Bible says in the book of Acts that the

Holy Spirit came upon them all and the house was filled with the sound of people praising and thanking the Lord. All because Peter believed God and trusted that God knew best, even when it went against everything he had known all his life. Because our great God does not show favoritism, those of us who are Gentiles are part of the family of God. And because of Peter, Paul and others who were able to let go of the old way, the way they thought was the only right way, they were able to tell people all over the known world about Jesus Christ the Lamb of God. May you and I be people like those great apostles, people ready to let go and let God. Thanks be to God!