

# Kate Cudlipp: Taking Hold and Letting Go

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

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## Taking Hold and Letting Go

I want to begin with a confession. Once that is shared, I hope we can explore together the richness – and complexity – of what Jesus calls for in the gospel passage [[Luke 14: 25-33](#)]. And perhaps we will leave here with a greater willingness to count as honestly as we can the cost of discipleship and a resolve to make whatever payments we can, even as we see the gaping chasm between what we are called to and where we are.

I begin by confessing that I take to heart the commentators who warn against trying to soften the message in the Gospel of Luke. In this gospel, Jesus calls for us to let go of all the worldly things to which we are wedded and which blind us to God's call on our lives. It won't do to pretend that the message is otherwise.

I then must confess that I am not able to "say goodbye" to all my possessions. I confess that I do not often take up my cross, and I certainly am not carrying it unflaggingly to a final destiny. I cannot count myself as one of Jesus' disciples by the unadorned definition in today's gospel. I am unwilling to let go of possessions and habits; I am afraid to take hold of the gospel's message.

Letting go and taking hold, that is what today's gospel is about. The complexity comes when we ask, "What is it in my life that I am called to take hold of and what am I to relinquish?"

Fall is a time of letting go and taking hold. We let go of summer vacations – of time away from homework and routines. And we take hold of new challenges at school, in our families, and often, at our places of work.

This fall, some parents among us are letting go of their kids to attend school or college for the first time. This fall, you young people will take hold of new challenges – both academic and social. You have new teachers, new courses, and for some, new schools and new questions about who you want to be friends with.

Taking hold and letting go – that's really one way to describe our whole lives. In order for us to enter the world, our mothers' bodies had to let go of us, and someone had to take hold of us to help us start our journey. One of a baby's chief occupations is taking hold of things and letting them go. That's a primary way of learning. As children and adults we have friends we take into our hearts and then have to let go, as they or we move.

We let go of some things so we will have the capacity to take hold of others. We call this letting go of the old in order to make room for the new. It is an integral part of living, whether we choose it or it is forced upon us. Jesus calls on us to listen for God's voice to tell us what we are to give up and what we are to take hold of. Jesus calls on us to make choices, not simply let life happen to us.

We come into the world with nothing, so to speak, and leave in the same state. But God gives us an abundance of gifts during our lives. We are given families, homes, good things to eat and drink, things to learn, work to do, clothes to wear, music to listen to, colors and forms to see. We're given innumerable companions in the natural world and distant stars to marvel at.

Our lives are not lives of scarcity; they are ones of

abundance. The challenge of letting go for us, in this country and at this time, is not to turn our backs on the abundance and see scarcity as the plight of humanity but to learn to hold what we have lightly – with open hands. And the Christian challenge, as distinguished from the detachment that is often emphasized in some other religious traditions, is to care passionately about creation and its fruits, recognizing all the time that they are not *ours* but God's.

This is the hard part. Something in us wants to own what we love. It is not enough to have the abundance on loan, to enjoy and celebrate. We must control it and be able to dispose of it at will. When we have taken hold of something, worked for it or invested in it, we have real trouble letting it go, be it a loved one or material wealth.

Jesus saw this and in the gospel lesson warned that our inability to let go will be the thing that stands between truest life and us. This truest life – the life that answers our deepest longings – that Jesus offered is not all sunlight, flowers, and soft breezes. Suffering is an integral part of any life – whether in Christ or not – and life in Christ is likely to bring additional suffering because it goes against the entrenched powers of the world. Jesus knew this and asked his would-be disciples to reckon with that fact.

As most – if not all – of you know, I have never been a parent. I have never experienced what a colleague of mine several years ago said about his relationship to his children: "They have the power to make me feel emotions I never knew I had. I have never loved so fiercely or been so angry as I have with my kids. I have literally wanted to throttle them and have felt willing to give my life for them." I think that in parenthood we have a wonderful example of the competing forces at work in our lives. On the one hand a parent will give anything – life itself – for the well being of the child. On the other, parents find it very hard to let go.

In a surprising way, I believe this is one aspect of what Jesus was talking about when he talked of turning one's back on children and parents. We turn our backs on our children when we leave them in kindergarten or on the steps of a dorm. And our young people turn their backs on us. We walk away because it is time – God's time – for them to try their wings. If we can't let go, we get in the way of God doing God's work in their lives. We are following our own will and not God's. And for a young person not to walk away, to be too attached to home and parents, is to hide from God's call on their life.

A few weeks ago we had moving testimony to the poignancy of a parental "letting go" moment. Elizabeth Dearborn sang to us a song she had written to Shoshanna:

*I love you in the morning  
I love you in the day  
I love you coming through my door most any way  
But now that you are growing up I see it's time to go  
I see that you have roots and wings and blessings  
to bestow... of your own special kind,  
You're not mine anymore. The door is open.  
Letting go is not easy.*

Jesus calls us to let go – turn our backs on our families – not only so that we may follow God's call more readily but also so that *they* may. One of the things that has bothered me most in reading passages like today's gospel is that they, on first impression, seem to set up an either/or situation. They seem to pit following some singular call from God against all the other calls on our lives. As I have dwelt with this question, I have come to believe that there is no abstract, singular "Call of God" in a person's life. We are born into the web of creation; we are integral parts of it. The calls on our lives are many and changing, depending upon where we are in the web at any particular point. The difficult part – the complexity we are dealing with – is understanding which are

God's calls on our time, energies and resources and which are seductive voices calling us away from life in God.

I do not hear Jesus calling us to abandon this world but to work to change it. I do not hear Jesus calling us to abandon our parents or children or brothers and sisters but to do all in our power to make them agents of change. If, and only if, they become the means that keep us from hearing and following God's call in our own lives, must we turn our backs on them.

Another piece of Jesus' warning to those who would be his disciples is to give up or "say goodbye to" all their possessions. I want to heed the warning of those commentators I mentioned against softening this instruction. At the same time, I believe the warning has more to do with an attitude toward material riches than with walking the streets penniless.

In the parable of the stewards to whom the master gives certain material goods, each is expected to deal with the wealth in a way that increases its value. The ones who use it wisely are entrusted with more. This is a parable about abundance and a right use of resources.

(As an aside I want to mention that this parable and other passages have been used to conclude that rich people are the ones who are doing God's will. The "Gospel of Prosperity" is one being proclaimed today in some circles, as witnessed in an article in the Washington Post on Thursday. Clearly, that is not Jesus' message.).

The point of the story is that the money does not belong to the stewards but is entrusted to them to use wisely. When we look at another parable that was part of our lectionary last month, where the rich fool was planning to store up wealth for himself and God ends his life, we begin to see the broader sweep of Jesus' message: Abundance is part of God's creation and is here to be used and increased. We stray from God's

intention for us when we seek to appropriate the abundance for ourselves.

So we are back to letting go. If only I could truly regard all of my wealth as resources put at my disposal by God – and belonging to God – I would be freed up to act very differently from how I act at present. Rather than being accountable solely to some measure of whether my savings grow and whether I have enough resources to see me through to the end of my life, I would be accountable for seeing how many others my wealth could benefit.

And it is not only material possessions that make up our wealth. I am especially aware of how I hold onto habits and routines that insulate me from the needs and demands of others. If Jesus were speaking to me, I think that before he even got to the question of my material wealth, he would challenge me to open up my time and energy to work for and with others rather than keep those resources so carefully guarded. I see many others in this community who are far more generous with their time and attention, and in those choices I see God at work.

Jesus addresses what is described as a large crowd, probably a lot of admirers who are drawn to him by his charisma. Jesus says, "It's not enough to be attracted to me; it's not enough to feel good around me. More is required. To experience what I promise, you must commit wholeheartedly, neither as an observer nor as a member of an audience. Let go of your bystander status and take hold of the real thing."

Before Jesus tells the crowd to reckon the cost of following him, however, he has given them a taste of the fullness of life that is to be had as his disciple. The glimpse of fuller life is what makes possible the changes he calls for. The glimpses we get today are not from the physical presence of Jesus but from the stories of his ministry, from the lives of past and present saints, and from living as part of a

community that tries to name, experience and share that fuller life.

This is what we, through the power of the Spirit among us, offer to each other, young and old alike: glimpses of what it means to be part of the Body of Christ. We help each other see the glory and count the cost. Over the years I have been graced to witness adults and young people in this community give of their time and talents and material resources to others – both within and outside Seekers. I have seen the joy in other's lives as they do things that seem very hard to me. That is a glimpse of what Jesus is talking about – giving of one's self and one's possessions and experiencing, as a result, deeper, richer, truer – not easier – life.

In Sunday school I've learned from, as well as taught, our kids. Sunday school is a place for teachers and students alike, to bring our questions and our account books, a place to see what is worth taking hold of and what we must let go of in order to live a richer, fuller life.

The number of young people in the Sunday school program has dwindled over the past couple of years. All of us would like to see more children – and their families – coming into this community. There is a certain "critical mass" of kids that tells the kids that they are part of an important group of peers. Yet a preoccupation with getting more people into the Sunday school program could stand in the way of providing the kind of program everyone wants: one in which both adults and young people teach and learn, and one in which everyone learns that he or she is an important member of the community. So I am learning to let go of the concern about there not being enough children and taking hold of the need to be part of a lively and ongoing program that will be here for whoever walks through our doors. I hope other adults and Seekers young people can see their participation in that light.

The young people in the Christian Growth Class began in

earnest last year to think about the costs and the value of a Christian way of life. They asked themselves, "Do I see the truth behind the teachings? Am I able to choose to take hold of the way that is called 'Christian'? Am I inspired to let go of the practices and values that impede me on that way?" The answer for some was, "No, not at this time," but that was not the end of it. All committed to continuing the search for meaning and truth in life.

I think this is what Jesus was calling for. He was saying to those who had seen him and believed, that they could call themselves disciples only if they had counted the cost and then chose to stay with him. I don't think he said to those who hadn't yet reckoned with the price of discipleship, "Forget it." I don't think he banished forever those who counted the cost and found themselves coming up short. I think he invited those who sensed something life-giving about him but couldn't entirely abandon their old ways to continue to journey with him, and, like the prodigal son, to declare whenever they realized that the price was worth paying that they were ready to let go of the old and take hold of the new.

I pray that as we journey together we learn how to love better and live more abundantly even as we discover that discipleship is costly and letting go is never easy.