

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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June 5, 2016

Text: Genesis 19:15-24

Title: “We Live. We Love. Looking Back”

There is an app you can get for your smartphone or iPad called “Let go”. Apparently, you can use it simply by taking a photo of something you want to sell with a phone or an iPad. It uploads quickly and before you know it the item is on the net and ready for viewers to see what you are asking for it. The company is marketing it by making fun of our tendency to cling to things beyond what is rationale. They make fun of hanging on to something because we are afraid to let go. The tagline for their marketing campaign is the same as their app title: “Let go”.

But sometimes we struggle with letting go. It’s not just about things we keep beyond what is reasonable because we have some emotional attachment to them, but it can also manifest itself by clinging to the past in such a way that we find ourselves afraid to move forward, to change, to accept that God’s possibilities await us. Sometimes we define ourselves and others based on the stories of the past rather than seeing ourselves and others in the light of God’s love and forgiveness. How can we experience the joy and freedom of God’s love and grace when bound up by our inability to let go?

Once again we turn to a story in Genesis, a well-known story of Lot and his pillar of salt wife. It begins in chapter 18 when God and Abraham have a conversation. God makes known to Abraham that God is about to destroy the city of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. Abraham knows that Lot lives there with his family. Lot is identified as both Abraham’s brother and his nephew in Genesis. Some claim that this was so because Lot’s father died and Abraham’s father, Terah, then raised Lot as a son and so he could have been considered both Abraham’s nephew and his brother. Suffice it to say that Lot was a close relative of Abraham’s.

Abraham cared about Lot’s welfare. And so when God makes it known that God is about to destroy the city in which Lot lives, Abraham has a respectful debate with God. Abraham asks God:

23-25 “Are you serious? Are you planning on getting rid of the good people right along with the bad? What if there are fifty decent people left in the city; will you lump the good with the bad and get rid of the lot? Wouldn’t you spare the city for

the sake of those fifty innocents? I can't believe you'd do that, kill off the good and the bad alike as if there were no difference between them. Doesn't the Judge of all the Earth judge with justice?"

26 God said, "If I find fifty decent people in the city of Sodom, I'll spare the place just for them."

What if there are only 45?
"I won't destroy it if there are forty-five."

29 Abraham spoke up again, "What if you only find forty?"

"Neither will I destroy it if for forty."

30 He said, "Master, don't be irritated with me, but what if only thirty are found?"

"No, I won't do it if I find thirty."

31 He pushed on, "I know I'm trying your patience, Master, but how about for twenty?"

"I won't destroy it for twenty."

32 He wouldn't quit, "Don't get angry, Master—this is the last time. What if you only come up with ten?"

"For the sake of only ten, I won't destroy the city."

Abraham stops at 10 but the point is made: God changes God's mind. It's an extraordinary thing Abraham does. With great respect, he challenges what God is intent on doing, and the Lord changes course because of Abraham's concern that God be God and not indiscriminately kill.

God goes to the city in the form of two angels and is greeted by Lot who takes the angels into his home. When the people learn of the stranger's presence, everyone comes out—every man young and old—and surround Lot's house. They want Lot to allow them to do violence to the guests. They want to humiliate them, show them whose boss. This is gang violence and it's this sinfulness among other behaviors that leads to God's action.

Ezekiel put it this way: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it" (Ezekiel 16:49-50). Lot will not concede to the rioting crowd's demands and in fact does something reprehensible himself by offering them his own daughters instead. But this is about crowd violence. It's about abuse and humiliation and the mistreatment of strangers and so the crowd isn't interested in Lot's daughters. God will have none of it which is where we pick up the story read this morning.

So Lot and his family are told by the angels they have to leave because the city will be destroyed. The men tell him he has to go but he apparently is in no hurry. "He lingered", the text says. I don't know if he is like me on Saturday morning when I sit there with my cup of coffee and linger before I get off the chair to get something done, just slow to get with the program. I don't know if he was so attached to his home that he couldn't bear to leave it even though he was told the city would be destroyed and he and his family would be consumed along with all the rest if they didn't leave. Maybe he was pondering the family photos on the wall and the measurements he took of the kids as they grew that were still scratched on bedroom walls. I don't know why he didn't feel the urgency, what was holding him back, but Lot lingered, and the two men had to take them by the hand in order to express God's mercy for them. Sometimes maybe we need God to take us by the hand in order to move us beyond our lingering. Maybe we need God to be active in showing us that God wants to be merciful to us when we would rather linger in our current situation even if it may not be good for us to stay where we are.

The men of God lead them out of the city where they told them to leave and not to look back. After a brief dialogue about where Lot should go, they head off to a little town called Zoar and on the way, Lot's wife does what all of them were warned not to do: she looks back. As she does so, she turns into a pillar of salt.

Looking back isn't always a negative. I've been watching the new Roots series on the history channel and the director of the updated series said he sat down with his children to watch the original series but they weren't interested. He wanted them to watch so they understood this part of American history, but because the first series was shot in 1977 they weren't interested. So he decided to do a remake so his children and others like his children would pay attention and learn about this painful part of American history.

Sometimes looking back isn't a negative. Philosopher George Santayana wrote (in The Life of Reason, 1905) : "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Remembering the past is critical to the future. We cannot forget, for example, how the holocaust developed through one person ascending to political power by playing on the fears of an entire country and then once in power using that power to systematically work to eliminate a group of people based on their religion and who they were as a people. There are times we must look back in order to avoid repeating past mistakes.

But then there are times when looking back takes life from us, leaves us on the plain like a pillar of salt. We have some friends going through a difficult separation and now looks like a divorce is in their future. These are folks we have vacationed with, raised our kids with, enjoyed time with for 25 years. And I can tell you it's painful to try to remain neutral because we love them both. It's painful to hear both sides share the anger for the other about past offenses each has committed against the other. I want to take them both by the hand and tell them God desires mercy for both of you. Get away from the destruction. Get out of the city and don't look back toward the ugliness of bad behavior. Cling to the future God has for you. Move toward hope and life ahead and not back toward destruction.

Is there something in you that keeps you looking back in ways that stifle the life in you now? Is there a past preoccupation that keeps you from moving with hope and promise into the future that God has for you? Is there something you need to let go so you can move forward?

If you can't let go on your own, if you are so locked into looking back at whatever

destruction has been part of your life, that you need help, consider some counseling. We are a partnership church with the Fresh Aire Samaritan Counseling Center where help can be found. Sharing with a trusted friend may help. A spiritual director or pastor may too.

The gift in all of this is that God desires mercy for Lot and Lot's family. God wants them to live and live well. So it is with all of us. God offers mercy, hope and promise for the future. When we can claim that, experience that gift, then we live and then we love.