

GIVING THINGS UP

II Samuel 12:15-23; 18:24-33; John 12: 20-26

April 25, 2010

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Do you ever get the feeling that a sermon is for you? That it is directed to you? That it's being preached with you in mind? That you are the target? That it's aimed right at you?

If that happens, it happens without the design of the preacher. No minister I know would intentionally preach a sermon aimed at a particular person - a particular problem, yes, but not a particular person.

And so, if you get the feeling that the sermon is for you, it must be so by the strange interacting of your spirit with the spirit of the minister and the Holy Spirit mysteriously making truth alive.

This I say as preamble to this sermon on giving things up. You may feel that you are the one to whom this sermon is directed and that you are the one for whom it is being preached. Indeed, I hope you may feel that way, for that will make the sermon worthwhile. It won't be a mere academic exercise in which we spin our wheels.

Even if you think the sermon is for you, do not make the mistake of thinking it is for you alone. You need to know that your feeling is a universal feeling, that your need is a universal need, and that's why we call this experience together "common worship." It's not common in the sense of shabby; it's common in respect to being ours together.

Giving things up is something you have had to do, of course. I have had to give things up, too. The person on either side of you in the pew has had to give things up, also.

Giving things up - that's life. Giving things up? That's hard. Giving things up graciously - that's the secret.

Giving things up - that's life. We use the phrase with a shrug of the shoulders. Well, that's life - with a kind of resignation, as though you weren't consulted, and you couldn't do anything about it. You had to take it whether you wanted to or not. It's inevitable. And so it is. There is that about life which might well be described as giving things up - one after another goes - all the way through from the beginning to the end.

We are on an escalator from the moment we are born. We turn and glance back for another look, but we are forever carried on to new challenges and new surroundings. This constant movement gets to you. You wonder whether you are moving or the world around you is moving; but either way, it's the same. There is movement. What is now in sight moves away, and something else takes its place.

You know that the process of giving things up begins as soon as we are born? A baby is surrounded with love and constant care. He or she drinks from a bottle; they like their bottle; they cannot go to sleep without their bottle; they depend on it; they cry for it; they feel secure and comfortable when they have it. Nevertheless, the time comes for the bottle to go. We call it the weaning process. But can he

or she ever get along without it? The child does not want to give it up, so at a very early age one comes face to face with life's law - one must give things up.

Turn many pages quickly. Stop at commencement time - graduation from high school. Twelve years of education are ending. The graduate walks across the stage and reaches out to receive his or her diploma; and at that time, in a way, they are giving up their youth. From now on they are adults. They are more and more on their own. Society will not make them go to school any longer. Now they have personal responsibility to take - making a living, and more important, making a contribution to humanity.

Come marriage, for some - the wedding day is in some respects a day of giving things up. We ask the families "Who comes today to bless this marriage?" or we ask the father of the bride, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" The question is a formality, but it cuts into the hearts of life. Parents are called upon to in some significant way to give up their children.

The years pass - parenthood. Before they know it, these two who were married back there have children getting married now. These two persons who gave up their childhood and youth when they were married are now called upon to give up their children. Their home will never be the same.

If we live long enough, we approach retirement with all that that means in terms of giving things up. How could they ever get along without us at the plant or in the office? Somehow they do. The world goes right on, and that comes as a shock which takes a while to get over. We give up going in to the office or the plant every day - the routine of that. Some are lost without it. We look forward to retirement - and then we have a difficult time adjusting to it.

Eventually, we give up this mortal life. Listen to the reference to this in folk song: "Gonna lay down my burden; down by the riverside, hang up the fiddle and the bow."

No more music, no more work, no more songs, no more sermons, no more trips. We give up our physical life in the experience we call death, and meanwhile, we have given up loved ones and friends, one by one in death.

All of this is not to be gloomy. I am not a gloomy person - you know that. It is simply to say that life consists of giving up one thing after another. You cannot hold on to things - you just cannot. You lose your grip. Things slip away. They drift out of touch, and there is no bringing them back again. They're gone. You reach out toward them longingly. Giving things up - that is life.

Then, second, giving things up - that is hard. So hard, we can scarcely bring ourselves to let them go, for these are the things we have used and enjoyed and employed. These are the ones we have loved and laughed with and wept with. We do not want to have to let them go. Do we have to?

We consider two episodes in the life of King David and empathize with him as he gives up two children, one in infancy and the other in adulthood. David and Bathsheba had a child in their illicit relationship. It was so involved and so wrong, David ended up sending Bathsheba's husband into the

forefront of the battle where he would be killed. Thus he was taken out of the picture so David could marry Bathsheba. The child was born, and they were happy - for a while.

The baby became critically ill. David turned to the Lord and begged in prayer that his child might live. He did not want to let it go. He went without food. He lay all night long before the Lord on the ground. His associates begged him to get up and eat, but he would not. Seven days later, the baby died. Since he had mourned so heavily already, they were afraid to tell him. "Whatever will he do to himself when he learns that the child is dead?" they asked.

David saw them whispering. He knew without their telling him. He blurted out, "Is the baby dead?" They nodded affirmatively and the king got up off the ground, washed, brushed his hair, changed his clothes, and he went to the tabernacle to worship the Lord. Then he returned to the palace and ate, and all of his aides were amazed. They could not understand.

"While the baby lived, you wept and refused to eat. Now that the baby is dead, you've stopped mourning and are eating again." And David explained, "I've fasted and wept while the child lived, for I thought perhaps the Lord would let him live. Why should I fast now? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

That was hard for David; of course it was - as it would be for any parent. But something still harder would come his way. His son, Absalom, rebelled against him, organized an army to do battle against him - son against father. And a runner brought reports from the battlefield. David anxiously awaited for every report. One runner came to say, "All is well," and David sensed something wrong, so David inquired, "What of Absalom, my son?" Well, since the king demanded the whole report, the runner answered, "He is gone." And David broke into tears and went to his room weeping, "My son, Absalom, my son, my son - would God I had died for you. O Absalom, my son, my son."

It's hard to give things up. I need not tell you that, for you already know it. All I would do is remind you that it is so. As we move from one stage in life to another, we must take leave of what is there and move on to what lies ahead.

One of the good things that some do in families over and over again that brings out this poignancy even to children is to have a dog or a family pet while the children are growing up in the household. I remember as a youngster that neighbors of ours raised puppies. It always appears to be such fun watching the puppies develop, observing the mother taking care of them. They become the center of attention for a number of weeks, and the children bring home their friends to see the puppies and play with them.

But there comes a time for the puppies to go to new homes, "Oh, can we keep them?" the children ask, and usually the family says, "No," and they say, "None of them?" and the parents say, "None of them." If the children learned nothing from that experience other than that we have to give things up, even things we like or love very much; if they learned nothing else, it was well worth it for them to learn, for that is a truth which must be learned one way or another. Giving things up - that's life. Giving things up - that's hard. But, now, their, giving things up graciously - that's the secret. But how?

Well, for one thing, it will help if we accept early in life that everything we have is ours to use, but not ours to keep. Everything. It is loaned to us. Ours to enjoy for a while, but not forever; and this applies to our bodies, our health, our associations, our possessions. We call them possessions. We think we possess them. We cannot take them with us.

We are in the midst of a beautiful spring season. Signs of life are all around us. Back in March we said, "Soon, very soon." And that first green which tinged the trees was a special shade of green, you know. It was a green gold. Robert Frost observed it with the eye of the poet, and he wrote this:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold,
Her early leaf the flower,
But only so an hour;
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day,
Nothing gold can stay.

So, you see, it's ours to enjoy, ours to use, ours to have, but only for a while.

Another thing which will help us to recognize that as we move from one chapter to the next, that is precisely what we are doing - moving from one chapter to the next. One door closes, another opens. And so it has always been, and so it will ever be. The reason we are overcome with grief is that we look back instead of looking ahead. Happiness and peace are not back there somewhere. We must find a new happiness. We must create new relationships. There is no peace to be found except the peace available to us in this very moment.

It's like crossing a stream, jumping from rock to rock. There was such a stream between my home here in Cincinnati and French Park where we sometimes played. You could walk the long way around on the road, or you could take the shortcut down the hill and come to the creek where there was no bridge, and stones jutted up out of the water at convenient intervals. Some were smooth and flat. Others were angular and insecure, but if you negotiated it just right, you could make it across without getting your feet wet. But it took some nerve, and it took some faith, and some confidence, and your eyes on the goal.

Thus we make it through life from one place to another, from one position to another, from one home to another. The one thing we simply cannot do is to stand still. We have to step on in faith, with some measure of confidence. We take a leap in faith - when will we ever learn that the Lord keeps our coming in and our going out and our moving on?

And yes, finally we will move on out of this world. We will take leave of all of this. Again, it is our faith which stands us in good stead for that time and that experience.

Oliver Wendell Holmes looked one day at the shell of a little sea animal, the nautilus. He was intrigued by its name and its form. A series of chambers formed one by one, lived in, then moved out of into the next chamber, new and larger, ever new, ever larger. And he was inspired to write something that my high school English teacher made me memorize:

Built thee more stately mansions, O, my soul,
as the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from Heaven with a dome more vast
Till thou at length are free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell
by life's unresting sea!

Go ahead and hold onto it - clutch it - refuse to let it go, and finally you'll have to let it go for your will be unable to hold it any longer. Let it go, freely - joyously - and you will experience a freedom you never knew before. Thanks be to God. Amen.