



## Sermon Series: Spiritual Practices to Sustain Us and Our World

January 29, 2012 Reflection by Nancy Talbot

"Letting Go"

Mark 1: 16-20

One of my favourite quotes is from American theologian Frederick Buechner. "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

But just what is your deep gladness? When I think about what makes me glad; what makes me happy; what gives me pleasure; a lot of things come to mind. Having money makes me happy. Seriously, I'm a lot nicer to be with when I've got cash in the bank. A good glass of wine can make me very cheerful. A new pair of shoes literally puts a spring in my step. Having a job, getting my hair cut, dinner with friends, and my family all make me glad.

But if all of those things were taken from me, would I still have my deep gladness? Would I discover what deep gladness really is?

Something that has always compelled me about the call stories of the first disciples, the stories of Simon and Andrew, James and John, is that as soon as Jesus utters the invitation "follow me" they immediately drop everything and go. Not only do James and John drop their nets, their livelihood, they also drop their father Zebedee. They leave him behind in the boat, without hesitation.

There's really only two things we can conclude about this. Either they hated their jobs and their father and were just waiting for any excuse to get out of town. Or, there was something so compelling about Jesus that following him was worth leaving everything behind. They just had to go, they couldn't stop themselves.

Several years ago I met a Roman Catholic nun named Ruth. Ruth was in her 60s when I met her. She was on sabbatical from her ministry in Bangladesh where she worked in an orphanage. Ruth wore outdated glasses, frumpy long skirts and her hair looked like she cut it herself. But she had a smile and a pair of twinkling eyes that could melt the hardest heart. I fell in love with Ruth the moment I met her. Here was someone who had given up all earthly concerns to follow Jesus, to serve the poor in one of the poorest countries in the world.

You can imagine how shocked I was when one day Ruth told me that she had been praying the passage from the Bible that we read this morning, the passage about the call of the disciples. She said that she had imagined herself standing by the seaside, hearing the voice of Jesus calling to her, Ruth. And she started to follow, she started to take steps towards him when suddenly she felt this tugging behind her. She when she turned around to see what it was, she realized it was a net, a fishing net. The net was full of stuff, all kinds of stuff that was holding her back. When she told me this story I remember thinking to myself, if you, Ruth who in my opinion have left it all to follow your call have that much stuff in your net, what have I got in mine? How many things, emotions, material possessions, attachments do I have?

Truth be told, most of us are more like Ruth than we are like James and John, Andrew and Simon when it comes to letting go and letting God. Most of us go through life dragging a lot of baggage behind us in our nets, a lot of stuff that weighs us down and hooks us and holds us back from truly embracing and trusting life. Not all of it is necessarily bad stuff either. For years when I was a young adult, one of the most perplexing aspects of the bible for me was

the call to leave my family behind. For the life of me I couldn't figure out why Jesus would ask people to do that. I actually loved my family of origin, I still do. They are life-giving for me. Why would I want to leave them to follow anybody? It all sounded so harsh to me and not at all in line with the spiritual life I wanted to have.

But then I came a point in my life when I realized that I was holding onto my family in a way that wasn't allowing me to embrace what was coming next in my life. I realized my attachment to my family was holding me safe and secure but it was also holding me dependent on them in a way that disallowed me from taking chances. They were what I trusted in life, not life itself. They protected me from having to trust deeply in life.

Eventually I had to let go of them, not stop seeing them or relating to them, but letting go of them as my primary source of trust and dependence. I had to grow up, so I could become who I was meant to be.

That's what's letting go is all about, it's about opening up a space for something else to come into existence in our lives. It's about entering into a deeper trust. We can't embrace or reach out for something new or something more when we're too busy holding onto something else.

Not everything that hooks us or tugs on us and holds us back is bad, in fact it's the good stuff that can be the hardest to let go of, when the reason we're letting go is the call to serve life, the call to make a deeper commitment to ourselves and to the world.

If we think about that in the context of this sermon series we are engaged in these weeks, this series about spiritual practices to sustain us and our world, we can see that often it's our attachments to what we perceive to be the good things in life that are creating a way of life for our planet that is unsustainable. So much of our way of life seems like it's about deep gladness, all the freedoms and choices we have, but many of those freedoms and choices we have and what we have in general comes at the expense of others. Remember again what Frederick Buechner said about God's call. It comes in the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet, not where our gladness, our happiness leaves the world hungry in its wake. It can be hard to let go when what we are being called to let go of gives us a sense of security, or a sense of accomplishment or just a sense of comfort.

Sometimes it's easier to start the practice of letting go in order to embrace a more abundant life by doing it with things that we know we would be better off without, those things we drag behind us in our nets that are clearly life-denying: our insecurities, our fears, jobs and relationships that drain us, addictions and habits that rob us of being our authentic selves. Those things that sometimes we are longing to let go of but we just can't trust who we could become if we didn't have them.

In my former congregation there was a young couple with two boys, Kathy and Tim. There was a lot about their life that was challenging and unhealthy. They didn't have much education, they didn't have much money, but they were good people. I liked them very much. I can remember Kathy telling me one time that she felt imprisoned in her life but she couldn't see a way out. She had decided that she was going to make the best of what she had and she did that very well. Then one day Tim was arrested for drug possession and their life began to unravel in a big way. Tim went off to rehab. They lost their primary source of income. The boys were ashamed of their Dad. It was not a good scene. Suddenly, Kathy had to let go of a whole lot of things she

had built up around herself to survive. Because that's all she had really been doing, surviving. She recognized that she had to become the primary breadwinner in the family until Tim got better. One day she came to see me and she told me that she had this crazy dream that wouldn't let her go. She wanted to be a funeral director, but she was terrified to step into the process. But the call to life had a hold on her and it wouldn't let her go. Our church community decided we wanted to help her. We gathered some money to send her on some courses, we arranged some care for the boys, and Kathy became a funeral director.

Sometimes we have no choice in life, we have to let go and sometimes what we find when we do is a deeper gladness.

When I first moved to BC from Ontario over 20 years ago, one of my friends thought that I should learn how to rock climb. You can't live in the mountains without knowing how to rock climb he said and I believed him. So he took me out one day to teach me how to climb. He strapped me into a harness, I roped up and then he began to lower me down the side of the rock face which thank goodness was only about 15 or 20 feet off the ground. I should mention that one of the greatest fears I have in life is the fear of heights. I thought I was doing quite well until suddenly my friend told me to let go of the rope. Lean back he said. Let go of the rope and lean back. I've got you he said. Let go. But I couldn't. I could not let go of the rope. I was too scared. I have no idea how long we were out there on that rock, but finally I did let go. Just for a moment. I leaned back and I let go. And you know what happened when I did? I didn't hit the ground. There was something there to catch me, a harness to hold me, a friend at the other end of the rope.

That day I learned that I could be someone I didn't know that I could be. Someone who trusted just a little more deeply in life, someone who was more free than when she started out the day, someone who leaned into life and touched deep gladness.

For most of us the call to life, the call to drop our nets and follow Jesus, the call to follow what is life-giving for ourselves and for our world, is not a call we answer once and for all. For most of us the call into our deep gladness is a practice, it's a practice of letting go, it's a practice of being free, it's a practice of deepening trust and living into a way of life that is more loving and more generous to ourselves, to others and to our planet.

What was so compelling about Jesus? What made people walk away from their old lives and embrace a new one? Surely it was the call to life.