

The Reverend Lucinda Duncan, Minister Emerita

Theme: "Letting Go"

Homily: "**Heartbreak**"

October 25, 2015

Call to Worship:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak Tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her that she has served her term.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness, prepare the way
of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
"Every mountain shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill
be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

"A voice says: "Cry out!"
And I said: "What shall I dry?"
"All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades.
But the word of our God will stand forever."
-From Isaiah 40

Reading: "LOST" by David Wagoner

King James Version

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you,
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

Sermon: "Moving ON: Letting Go of Identity"

I'd like to begin by acknowledging how special it is to be here with you today. It is wonderful to see you - those of you whom I've loved for years and those of you who have arrived more recently. I'm really happy to see you all.

I am also happy to be sharing the pulpit today with Claire. She has taken such good care of me since she arrived in the fall of 2013. Not only did she officiate at Bob's memorial service, but from Day One she has been a pastoral presence in my life. When we meet, her caring energy encourages me to do most of the talking, to shed heart-felt tears, or to ask questions that feel utterly unanswerable.

When Claire asked, last Spring, if I'd like to preach this month on the theme of "Letting Go," I was intrigued. The topic certainly relates to all the emotional work I had been doing. As I look back on all that has unfolded, beginning with my retirement as your minister, I realized that I would very much like to speak with you about "Moving On: Letting Go of Identity."

Much of my story will be personal, however I hope your experiences with loss, moving on, and identity change will add balance for you as you listen. The questions I would pose for you, now, now include these: Where and when have these identity changes occurred for you? What feelings were surprising, or the hardest to deal with? What wisdom has begun to emerge?

My first identity change started when I decided the time was right for me to retire. My husband Bob had retired three years earlier, the congregation was strong and well-functioning, and it felt like the right time to move on. And, as is expected of all retiring ministers, even of Ministers Emeritas, I needed to give your interim ministers and your newly called minister a great deal of space to establish themselves.

I thought the retirement process we all went through together felt just right. You threw a wonderful party for me and the goodbyes were heartfelt. After I cleaned out my office and went to Maine for the summer, however, I began to experience enormous sadness. When I described these feelings to my doctor and asked if she thought I was depressed, her response was immediate: "Lucinda," she exclaimed, "you're not depressed...you're *bereaved!*"

That helped a little. I still missed you all terribly. But I decided to find ways to get reacquainted in my West Concord neighborhood. We got a wee labradoodle puppy, named "Bosun," I joined the West Concord Green Thumbs, and I watched with delight as Bob taught young Fenn School boys how to ice skate. Those activities were all fun. It seemed as if my first journey, setting aside my professional identity and finding new ways to re-connect with my neighborhood, was well underway. I felt positive about the prospects.

Six months later, in January of 2012, Bob and I received the devastating news that he had lung cancer. This began a identity shift, a second journey of letting go of who I'd believed myself to be. Life was such a blur of medical necessities; it required a new kind of watchfulness. Because all I wanted was to be at Bob's side, I found it difficult to complete my usual tasks. I had to

drop trying to be in charge of every detail during this interval. It didn't take much for me to feel overwhelmed, isolated, and exhausted.

This was when I realized how few close friends I had in the Concord area. Acquaintances? Sure - there were lots. But people to whom I could turn at any time for emergency help and support? Not so many. This was the unsettling result of having been a two-career family with growing kids and no extra time for personal friendships. In fact, the cancer and its treatment produced such significant new needs that the landscape around me began to feel unfamiliar. I felt disoriented and lost.

About this time Maggie Herzig and Marlene Ellin took me to lunch. I blurted out all these worries and they listened. Several days later Maggie called and said: "Lucinda, might you find comfort in having a small group of Follen people, of your choice, who would gather once a month to listen to whatever you need to talk about?" The idea was so simple: they would listen, care, and lend support when and as I needed it. All I had to do was say "yes."

So I did, immediately. When the group assembled and wondered what to call themselves, I grinned and said, "I have the perfect name for you: The Fab Five!" And sure enough, they were. They provided - and continue to provide - wisdom, comfort, practical help and deep understanding. And they knew, without question, that in this setting I was no longer functioning as their minister. We related on equal terms, as treasured friends, and they demonstrated, over and over again, that genuine ministry occurs whenever there is an intersection of love, trust, and knowledge.

Following Bob's death, on October 21, 2013, I faced a new identity challenge. I found myself wondering: "Who am I now if I am no longer "Bob's wife?" This question was a surprise to me. I've always thought of myself as an independent woman. Yet realistically, when you stay with someone through 47 years of marriage, which were preceded by three years of exclusive dating in college, you change. Yes, you might see yourself as independent. But boy, oh boy, you learn to act as a team.

I loved being Bob's partner. It felt so odd not to have him home at the end of the day. It took me months to stop fixing the food he liked the best (meat and potatoes) and to start cooking the food I vastly preferred. It felt weird not having Bob around to say "hello!" to, or to ask for help with problems or upcoming decisions. Evenings were predictably bleak. Having a puppy helped, but the loneliness was always there. It also didn't take me long to realize I'd been far too hard on Bob for not helping enough around the house. Turns out he did a zillion little jobs that he simply never mentioned.

After his memorial service was over and most of the condolence cards had come in, I basically sat on the sofa for three months and read feminist mystery stories. In mid-January, when I realized that the house seemed way too cold, I remembered: Bob had tried several times to teach me to put water in the furnace. Obviously I must have disregarded his careful tutoring because I knew, deep down, that this was really "his job!"

Fortunately, my handy neighbor graciously came over to fill the furnace and thankfully, made no sarcastic remarks about "clueless women." However, when he tapped a rusty light bulb in the

basement, wondering why it wouldn't light up and the exposed wires suddenly burst into flame, his advice was unequivocal: "Lucinda," he said, "You need to find out what kind of condition your house is in!"

When I found out is that nothing in the house was up to code, which, frankly, didn't surprise me at all. We'd been busy professionals and parents of three sons and a nephew for several decades. Additionally, Bob's Yankee aversion to spending money on house repairs had been well modeled by his parents, who had owned the house before us.

But as it turned out, the news about the house was not all bad. Fixing it up gave me a wonderful 18-month project. I got plenty of practice consulting experts and then making my own decisions. Another surprise was how easy it became for me to make decisions that Bob would not have made. I was ready to make the house both safe and beautiful.

But even the house project was not quite large enough to keep loneliness at bay. I'd often feel pretty low. Finally I realized that, ironically, this loneliness was providing me with a great excuse for not out of the house. I had become far too adept at coming up with reasons for why I couldn't respond to invitations, or couldn't attend. So last March, I took my large desk calendar and wrote, with a red Sharpie, "SAY YES!" at the top of each month's page. Then, when an opportunity arose, I tried to live up to that pledge. Funny how much happier that made me!

This past Wednesday was the second anniversary of Bob's death. Fortunately I am much more balanced now than I was following the one-year anniversary. But anniversaries are tough. I knew that, of course, but now I can tell you from an insider's perspective, that people who have lost loved ones need your words to affirm that they, the survivors, are still visible and still loved. They need to know that you are standing by them in their largely solitary work of letting go. It is such a comfort for them to know that you also understand how long it takes to unbraid the braid of togetherness.

I am still in this third journey of letting go of who I was, of finding my new identity and of figuring out how to move back into life. Experienced widows tell me that this process of readjustment takes at least five years. They caution against doing anything drastic until this length of time has passed. It seems to me that they must be right, for off during these past two years I've had the impulse to dump everything - sell the house, move somewhere else, and start all over again. When I come to my senses I realize this response is based on fear. Fear that my life here will never hold such wonderful fullness again.

Preparing for this sermon has taken me far longer than I usually spend on sermon-writing. The topic touches me deeply. When I accepted the invitation to write this piece, I thought the main question I'd address was "Who am I, now that my professional and personal identities have so dramatically changed?" As I continue to ponder, however, I find myself wondering, "From what does my resilient strength arise?" The answer is deceptively simple: from a faith based on my own prior experiences. In the past, after periods of disorientation and loss, I eventually experienced a "glimmering"

from deep within that ultimately grew into a new understanding of where I might next direct my life. Because I have also experienced, in a time of deep anxiety, the comfort of being surrounded

and supported by God's creative love, I find myself far more interested in the ancient words of scripture than I used to be.

I started the service this morning with the words of Isaiah 40, for example, because the progression of one's needs, from devastation to new energy, are so clear in that section. Yes, God says, "Comfort my people." They are broken and bereaved. Start there. But tell them, won't you, Isaiah, that pretty soon they'll hear a voice crying out about the work that remains to be done. Oh, and by the way, Isaiah, perhaps you should mention that the projects that remain are impossibly large. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Lift up every valley and make every mountain and low.

Now this passage does not ask us to envision large earth-moving machines. What it is telling us, in my opinion, is that there are still great issues of injustice before us. They cannot be resolved by only a few individuals. They will require the commitment of all. And oh, by the way, your excuses about why you cannot possibly participate are time-limited, as well, since each of us will wither like the grass, since all of us will fade like the flowers.

So although the next steps on my journey are not yet clear, I am beginning to feel ready to watch for the glimmering. And I am beginning to believe I may trade the original question, "Who am I, now that my identity has changed?" for the next question: "How can I choose to become more fully alive?"

Perhaps that is a question we all might ponder.
Amen.

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