

FCCS October 13, 2019
Rev. Curran Reichert

“Monkey Paw”

I wonder if anyone here knows how to catch a monkey? If you do- keep it to yourself for a minute. A couple weeks back, Woodland Star Elementary School took a field trip to the Sonoma Ashram, right there on Grove Street. The Ashram’s mission is to provide a sanctuary of peace in a hectic world. It is an island of sanity and anyone is welcome to walk the grounds.

The fifth-grade class had the great privilege of a private audience with esteemed guru Babaji. The children loved him and they had so many questions, particularly about monkeys. They had learned in class that monkeys are problematic in parts of India, they run in packs and can destroy entire crops of food. In certain areas of India they will even swoop down out of trees and steal the food from out of your hands. Monkeys are quick, agile, and in the wild they live in trees that can stretch a hundred feet or more off the ground. So how do you catch a monkey?

Here’s how: A farmer or hunter will bury a gourd in the ground and tamp down the dirt tight all around it. They cut a small hole just big enough for the monkey to fit his hand through. Inside the gourd they’ll put nuts or sweets, something the monkeys crave.

Sooner or later a monkey will come by and smell the nuts, slip their hand into the gourd and grab a handful, then they’ll try to pull their hand back out, but they can’t. The hole is small enough to put an empty hand through, but not big enough for a hand clutching a fistful of nuts. They’re stuck.

What should the monkey do, let go- right?

But they don’t. They want the nuts. They don’t want to surrender the nuts. So, they pull and pull and pull, refusing to drop the nuts, and the hunter or farmer comes up behind and snatches them. If the monkey had just let go of what they were holding on to, they could have been free.

My, my, my how easy it is to see how those monkeys get stuck, but what is it that paleontologists have been saying for decades- Is it that monkeys and humans have a lot in common?

Luke 17:11-19

Today's scripture can be interpreted as a story about being stuck and finding the courage to let go.

When Jesus encounters ten villagers afflicted with leprosy, he greets them with compassion- he knows what this disease has meant for their lives; the exclusion, poverty, and loneliness. But for all his miracle working and community building skill, Jesus does not appear to have been the kind of guy to sit down with the afflicted and ask them to talk about their pain. Mabey, he figured it best to deal with first things first; raise from the dead- then talk therapy, heal first- talk later.

Jesus' advice mirrors that of prophets of old, it is for the people to get up and "GO!" The afflicted, from the Hebrews to the lepers were instructed by God and God's messengers to get a move on- to go and seek their healing, to go and find the land of milk and honey, to go and discover wholeness in community. Sometimes people were told where and how to do that, sometimes they were left to figure it out themselves, but either way the instructions were the same, "GO!"

It's a small word but there's a lot in it. Let's break it down, what does it mean to go? For starters it requires a willingness to live with the uncertainty of moving into the unknown. This is where some folks stop before they ever get started. Fear of the unknown is the number one reason people get stuck in a rut.

Built into that stuck place is the fear of letting go of the very ground upon which we stand. There the fear of what's out there and there the fear of letting go of this here. My Mama used to call it the devil ya know.

Think about that for a moment, we cannot physically move forward unless we let go of where we are, the challenge is that even if we are not happy with where we are, inertia is a powerful force. I think people stay stuck not because they love their situation, but because they just can't move forward.

When Ellis Jane was four years old the movie "Frozen" became an international sensation. Little girls all over the world were flinging their arms open belting out the movies central theme, "let it go, let it go- can't hold it back anymore, let it go let it go..." Out of the mouths of babes as they say.

In our heads we know that if something is killing us inside or out, whatever the personal cost may be, it would be best to let it go and move into a future free from destructive patterns or habits- even if we can't imagine what that future looks like.

Pick your poison; spending, controlled substances, fossil fuels, negative thinking, we all have patterns that keep us stuck and we would all do well to heed Jesus' advice to get going.

Let's take a little practice quiz- only I'll give you the answer ahead of time. The correct answer is "Let it go."

I was once given a set of something called a mug rugs, hand crocheted by a dear now departed soul, in an astonishing array of awful colors- I have always hated them; should I hold on or let go?

You have underwear that you wouldn't want to be caught dead in, they are stained and the waistband is expired should you hold on to them or let 'em go?

You have mayonnaise in the fridge that would have been ok had the power come back on Wednesday, but by Thursday it's questionable; risk botulism or let it go?

Easy right? Now, let's get to some harder ones.

You have a beef with a family member whose done you wrong, those hard feelings cause you to resent or miss out on family gatherings.

Hang onto the grudge to prove you're right or let it go?

You grew up with a picture of how your life should've turned out, perfect career, family, home. It didn't turn out that way, but you make yourself crazy trying to live up to some imaginary standard. Hang on or let go?

You worry constantly about things that have never actually happened or about situations over which you have little or no control, this worry interferes with your enjoyment of life. Hang on, or let it go?

My personal bugaboo; you look at all the things that could or need to be done in a day, you know you don't have the bandwidth to do all of them, but bowing out of obligations is bound to cause upset. Do you stick with the plan and cram everything in knowing that at the end of the day you will be exhausted and resentful or do you risk temporary discomfort- cram it in or let it go?

Fortunately for us there is always more than one right answer. Even the people with Leprosy have more than one option for healing. Jesus says, "Go!" and most of them do but one of the people turns back. He turns back to Jesus to offer his gratitude and guess what; he is healed right then and there. You see there is more than one path to wholeness.

Let's say that, for whatever reason, there are things we are not able to let go, not yet anyway, let me ask you this if you can't let it go- can you consider holding it lightly?

The wise teacher Baba Kinaram, teacher that we can train ourselves to see that whatever is coming our way, whatever the mind is reacting too we don't have to clench onto it- we can just witness it, be curious about it, hold it lightly. The mind will do its thing, we don't need to follow it every time. If the mind runs, let it run. We don't have to run after it.

Go, let go, hold it if you must, but hold it lightly. If the monkey could relax his grip ever so slightly it might have been just enough to pull it's paw out of the gourd, after all freedom is freedom however you get there. Something to think about this week.

Amen