

LETTING GO

Luke 2: 41-51

Pilgrim Congregational Church
April 1, 1983

Elizabeth Oettinger

When my colleagues here were meeting to put together this Good Friday service, I was in the hospital having a baby. When I came back to work, I discovered that they had assigned to me the character of Mary in the hopes that my recent initiation into motherhood would have given me a new perspective on the mother of Jesus. For a moment I admit I was disappointed: women ministers never get a chance to reflect on the centurion or Peter. But as I thought about it, I realized that becoming a mother had indeed changed my perspective on Mary, that I could see in her figure at the foot of the cross now things that I could not see before.

When all the rest of those present looked at the figure of that man hanging from the cross, they saw a man whom they may have loved or may have hated or may have just been curious about. They saw a man who had been a great leader, a troublemaker maybe, but one whose power over the crowds had been respected or feared. They saw a man whose identity people speculated to be Elijah or another of the great prophets, or perhaps even the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. But when Mary looked at the cross, she saw a little boy who she would have been happy to see just grow up to be a healthy, honest carpenter, living close by in Galilee, immersed in work, and family, and that small community around him. But that was not to be. Quite early, even by the time he was twelve, Mary learned that she could not keep this child to herself, that she could not bind him to her dreams and visions of his future. She would have to let go and share him with a larger world than she had ever imagined, share him to the point where they--all those others--were more central to his life than she was. And it hurt.

When Mary looked at the cross, she saw a little boy, a baby, a young man who she would have given her life to protect. She saw him when he was lost in Jerusalem and made her almost frantic with anxiety until she found him, only to learn that he did not want her protection any more. He wanted to begin to make his own way in the world, that he wanted to begin taking risks and being responsible for the consequences of taking those risks for himself. Mary would have to let him go; she could not protect him any more. And that hurt.

When Mary looked at the cross, she saw her child dying. For this, she had learned to take a back seat to all those crowds of disciples who followed him around. For this, she had struggled to let him go, to let loose the urge to hold him and protect him. For this, she had stood by anxiously as he took his risks and made the authorities angry, and she never tried to stop him or hinder him in any way. What a reward for a mother who had cared so much.

For me, one of the sharp and jagged edges, one of the pains of this Good Friday, is the figure of Mary standing at the foot of the cross. The hardest thing for a mother to do is to let go of her child, and Mary had done it though she saw the danger involved for her son. And now he hung there dying. What a heavy sorrow to bear.

For she was right to let him go, right to let him take risks and follow where God led him, but that did not make it hurt any less.

It is a dangerous thing to proclaim the kingdom of God, to stand with the poor and the oppressed, to defy the authorities and

follow where God leads. It can lead to pain, and isolation: it can even lead to death. And yet if we are to be responsible parents, that is what we must encourage and allow our children to do. If we are to be good friends that is what we must encourage and allow our friends to do. If we are to be good Christians that is what we must encourage and allow ourselves to do. We must be willing to let go of our families and our friends and even our own lives, to take risks in the name of good causes, to dare to proclaim the truth in the midst of evil, no matter what the consequences.

One of the hard edges of Good Friday is that this sort of letting go will always hurt. It will bring us up short with the pain of Mary standing at the foot of the cross. But it is the right thing to do. And beyond the pain, there is the constant promise of God, the promise of Easter, the promise that our letting go will make a difference.