Receiving a Life

I was listening to a pastor friend of mine a couple of weeks ago saying how interesting it is that people tend to be divisible into specific kinds of groups based on their habits of life. There are early morning people and late night people. There are those who use a cell phone to call others and those who only type messages into a cell phone. There are those who refer to the evening meal as dinner, and those who refer to it as supper. There are Duke fans and then there are Carolina fans. There are rules people, and then there are those who break the rules.

The eighth chapter of the Gospel of Mark is a clear break in the rules of the story, and Peter, who is a rules person, does not want the story to change. For the first eight chapters of Mark’s gospel Jesus and his disciples have been traversing the Galilean country-side and it has been marvelous, simply marvelous, healing the sick, reaching out to the poor, gathering a community of friends together. Everything has gone according to the rules up until this moment. With this exchange between Jesus and his disciples, the rules of the game change. Jesus tells his disciples that he will undergo suffering, that he will die, and then rise again on the third day. Peter pulls Jesus aside to remind him of the rules. “Enough of the suffering and death stuff,” says Peter, “that’s not how the game is played.” And Jesus turns on his first lieutenant with a harsh rebuke and then says to the entire crowd, “any who would follow me must deny themselves and take up their cross. For those who want to save their lives will lose it. And those who would lose their life for my sake will save it.” The rules have changed.

Abram and Sarai are also rules people. They have played by the rules all their lives. Abram is 99 years old and Sarai is not far behind. They are in their twilight years, thinking more about the end than the beginning. And all of a sudden God changes the rules. Barrenness to fruitfulness. An old life gone, a new life about to begin. God is making a promise, a covenant, starting with them that will last from generation to generation. As a mark of this new life, new names are given. Abram is now Abraham. Sarai is now Sarah. The rules have changed.

Millard Fuller passed away a couple of weeks ago. He was the founder of Habitat for Humanity, the remarkable program for housing the homeless that spread across the globe. We have students from the Chapel who got on a plane early Friday morning to fly down to Honduras to work with Habitat for Humanity for spring break. In 1965, Millard Fuller was a rules person. He was a hardworking New York executive, putting in 100 hour work weeks, making the unheard of sum of one million dollars a year. He had climbed every possible ladder. From the outside he was playing by the rules, but on the inside he was dying. His life was crumbling around him. His children didn’t know who he was. He had lost his soul. One evening his wife announced she was leaving. It was as if his life had become a clenched fist. He was clinging so hard to something that he thought he wanted, the things that really mattered in his life had slipped right through his grasp.
In a desperate attempt to put his life back together he piled his wife and children in the car and drove down to Americus, Georgia to meet with some friends who had recently joined Koinonia Farms, a community where rich and poor and black and white lived together in the still segregated south, breaking all the conventional rules. He met with Clarence Jordan, founder of the community, who listened to Fuller’s pain and splintered life, and suggested that a million dollars a year is an awful burden to carry. Fuller stayed for a month, saw what was happening in Americus, began reading the bible, and caught a new vision. Putting his remarkable business savvy to work, he started Habitat for Humanity and the rest is history. Like Peter, and Abram, and Sarai, he was a rules guy, playing by the rules, only to discover the rules were about to change. He had to lose his life in order to save it.

Most of us are rules people. We play by the rules. The only way to end up at a place like Duke is to play by the rules, and there are all kinds of rules, most of them unspoken. There are generational rules. There are rules about polite social interaction. There are rules that come by virtue of social location. There are rules about business. And most of the rules that we conform to have as their foundation, a firm, unyielding, almost impenetrable principle, which is this: We belong to ourselves. We are the author of our own destinies. And thus the rules that run our lives have everything to do with managing, and grabbing, and reaching, and climbing, and most of all, achieving. Most of us, within the sphere of this university, are achievers, if not over achievers. And when the rules change, when life becomes not about what we can do for ourselves, but about what God has done in Christ on our behalf, it can be, as Peter discovered, terrifying.

Another group of students from the Chapel left this morning on a plane to New Mexico where they will spend the next week living with the brothers of Christ in the Desert Monastery. There they will live, if for only one week, by a different set of rules. It’s called the Rule of St. Benedict and it was written nearly 1400 years ago. The Rule of St. Benedict is quite short, and can be read over a cup of tea. The rule is prayer, obedience, work, rest, and community. At the heart of the rule of Benedict is the assumption that life is not to be achieved, it is to be received. Life is not to be made; life is a gift that is offered through the gracious life of Christ.

There are two sets of rules, rules of achieving, and that of receiving. The difference is what Millard Fuller discovered. It’s the difference between living as a clenched fist, and receiving life with an open hand. A fist can do many things. A fist can grasp and climb. A fist can hammer a nail and lash out in anger. A fist can be defiant, strong, and forceful. But a fist can never hold another’s hand. A fist can never fold in prayer. A fist can never reach out in friendship. A fist can achieve, but a fist can never receive. It takes a fist to hammer a nail into a cross, but it takes an open hand to have a nail driven into it.

Peter is playing by the rule of the fist. Millard Fuller was playing the rule of the fist. Many of us are playing by the rule of the fist.

And Jesus says about the rule of the first, the rule of grasping and achieving and striving, if you play by those rules the only thing that will happen is you will beat yourself to death. If
you want to live, truly live, you must first die, and then open your hands, and receive. Only by
losing our lives, can they be saved.

I wonder if any of you have ever had this experience. You want something really badly. I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s a promotion at work, or perhaps it’s a relationship that you just know will make everything better. Or a research project that you’ve pumped your heart and soul into for months and you are desperate to find out the results. Or you’re a parent and your child has a dream, and that dream becomes your dream, and you want it so badly for them it’s as if your own life has been lost in theirs. Or it could be on the more material side, a new purchase of some kind, or you’re desperate for the dow to turn around because you’d planned to retire in three years and now that looks impossible. And so what do you do? You go out and reach and grab and try. You do everything in your power to achieve it, to attain it, to hold it, and then it doesn’t work out. And you are crushed. It’s like the wind has been knocked out of you. And it hurts so terribly badly. But then after a bit of time and grief, the dust clears. You begin to open your eyes, and you start to look around a bit, and you see more clearly everything that is already there, and with a bit of distance maybe there is a deepened sense of gratitude, of appreciation, maybe the fist that had been doing so much work and taking so much energy now becomes an open hand, and maybe you realize that you have so much already, so much love and grace and joy and you simply have to receive it, to be thankful. Losing one’s life isn’t so bad, when there is another life, so full of grace, to be received.

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. The story of Lent is the journey from clenched fist to open hand. The clenched fist of sin to the open hand of salvation. The clenched fist of anxious Peter to the open and anointing hands of Mary Magdalene. The clenched and vengeful fist of Pontius Pilate and the crowds to the open and forgiving hands of Jesus. Taking Lent seriously means releasing our grasp on our old lives, so that a new life can be received. Lent is an affirmation that the covenant God began with Abraham and Sarah, that has continued through Israel, is once again received by the church. Like Abraham and Sarah, in Lent we are given a new name, or at least reminded of the new name we were given in baptism. Our name is not achiever, or maker, or producer, or consumer. Our name is the same as Peter’s name: Disciple of Christ.

For most of us the cost of being a disciple is too much. Denying ourselves, taking up the cross, losing our lives for the sake of the gospel may feel beyond us, reserved for the Millard Fuller’s of the world.

But that’s not good enough for Jesus. If we can’t lose our lives, then he’ll lose his. And when we have lost our way, when something outside of our control has plunged us into the dark, and we can’t seem to find our way to any life at all. He’ll find our lives for us. That is what the cross is all about. When we are terrified and panicked and confused, when the rules have changed and the ground has shifted underneath, Jesus does what we cannot do. Jesus loses his life, in order to give us his life, so that when we find ourselves grasping, and striving, and climbing, it is the cross that we end up clutching in our grubby, over-achieving hands.

If there is one person who exemplifies the rule of the fist for American society, it is Clint Eastwood. Clint Eastwood of Dirty Harry fame, of “Go ahead, make my day,” drama. Clint
Eastwood is the icon of the rugged American persona; the conquer-all-at-any-cost over-achieving spirit of this country. His most recent film is *Gran Torino*. He is the director and the main character. He plays a tough, over the hill but not ready to give up yet, Korean War Vet named Walt Kowalski who spent his post war years on the assembly line, hewing Detroit steal into Ford automobiles, the pride of the American road, the engine of American prosperity. But now all has changed. The factories are shutting down. Everyone who looks like him has moved out of the neighborhood, replaced by Vietnamese immigrants. Walt’s wife dies at the beginning of the film. His upwardly mobile kids spend more time thinking about their inheritance than his well-being. He is angry at everyone and everything, including the church. What’s more he is dying of cancer. Reluctantly, Walt is drawn in by the kindness of the Vietnamese family next door, and the teenage daughter and son, who exemplify a spirit of respect, hard work, and courage who slowly peel back the cynicism and bitterness that are suffocating his heart. The problem is the neighborhood gang, a group of Vietnamese toughs who won’t leave his young friends alone. They torment, bully, and beat the young boy. They rape the girl. It is too much for Walt, a man who has lived by the fist all of his life. He heads off to confront the gang in a Wild West showdown played out on the streets of Detroit’s inner-city. It is a classic Eastwood standoff. One against five. Good guy against the bad guys. He faces the house, the gang members all leaning out of the windows, guns at the ready. Eastwood reaches into his coat pocket, and then stretches out his hands. Amazingly, he is unarmed. Guns blaze. Bullets rip through his body. There are witnesses to the murder. The gang is shuffled off to prison. Walt dies in peace. The love of a Vietnamese boy and girl having saved him from himself; and through the gift of his open hands, the gang will never bother them again. His young friends are free to live.

“You must lose your life in order to save it,” says Jesus. But at the end, it’s not our own lives that we lose, as much as the life we have been given. The cross isn’t the heavy burden that we bear, but the one that Jesus bears on our behalf. Perhaps by giving up our selves, and the rules of the fist, we might have room to open our hands and receive the grace that is everywhere.

How do you want to live your life? What do you desire the last scene, the scene that might gather up all the other scenes of your life, to look like? A fist? Grabbing and clinging to whatever anger and bitterness and hurt and regret and fear and achievement that may torment the soul? Or will your life, and the final scene of your life, be as an open hand? Ready to let go and receive the true life that is Christ alone.

Amen.