

“Giving Up Control”

March 5, 2017

Giving It Up series – First Sunday in Lent

Can you relate to Larry’s feelings about control? I asked him to share because he expressed how I feel. I know God’s right, and I want to follow God, but I want to be in control. I want to be in charge, even as I seek to let God direct my path.

On Ash Wednesday, this past week, I was blessed to receive ashes and then mark others with the cross of ashes - a reminder for all of us that we stand on equal footing before God who loves us in spite of our sin and calls us back with grace.

One man who came up to me to receive ashes had a tear running down his cheek, and it was clear that he was feeling the significance of this moment. I called him by his name and made the cross on his forehead. After worship, as I was getting ready to go home, this same man was outside cleaning snow off people’s cars. As I got my brush out, he said, “Go ahead and get in your car.” I protested, but he said, “Please let me be about my Father’s business!” I wanted to be in control, but he was seeking to serve God. Control is hard to give up, even when people want to help.

Lately, I’ve been watching reruns of “The Middle,” a show about a family living in the Midwest. On a plane trip to New York when nothing is going right, wife Frankie accuses her husband Mike of having control issues when the plane is in the air circling New York because of a snowstorm. Mike can’t settle down because he wants to control the situation. Mike accuses Frankie of having control issues, too, as she’s keeping track of their kids and making sure that everything is okay.

Their conversation is typical. Control isn’t something we give up easily, and as we live in this season of Lent, maybe you’ve made a commitment to “give up” something. It may not surprise you to know that researchers are tracking real-time Lenten plans this year through Twitter. The top three things to give up are: alcohol, social networking, and chocolate.

For all of us who make those commitments to give up something that we’ll notice - that occasional drink, the constant connection through social media, or the decadence of chocolate - I wonder how many of us take any time to consider what God would have us give up? If we let God choose what we would give up for Lent - and what we’d take on instead - what would it be? Would God choose the favorite food or habit - or would God go bigger?

As much as we don’t want to admit it, control might be at the top of the list for God. Now granted, we’re called to have self-control in our walk with God; it’s a part of the fruit of the Spirit. But self-control is connected to this larger call to let God take

charge of our lives and rule in our hearts. Easier said than done, of course, but it's where we start.

I'm sure that my kids can't imagine a TV where you actually have to get up to change the channel or move the rabbit-ear antenna to get a picture to show up without lines running up and down the screen. I didn't have cable TV as a kid, and a remote control was not a part of life until I was older. Now there are remotes for every single piece of equipment connected to our TV!

We might feel like we have a lot of choices and therefore, a lot more control, but I'm not sure that's true. The desire to have control over our lives is nothing new, and the illusion that we can take control on our own terms isn't new either. Going back to Genesis confronts us with the struggle. We are made in God's image and God breathes life into us. God gives us meaning and purpose to our lives - to be caretakers - good stewards - of God's creation. God gives us freedom, but there are limits. We are not God, and we can't be God. We're not ultimately in control.

And even though God has provided what we need, we still want what we don't have. The serpent says that God can't be trusted, and man and woman go along. We push the limits and want total control when God calls us to trust.

The video about control showed those two doors - one where we have control and one where we trust and have faith in the midst of the unknown. Part of Jesus' battle in the wilderness just after he's baptized is about control. Remember this is after 40 days of fasting when the Tempter comes with offers that seem too good to refuse. And it's all about control.

"Go ahead - satisfy yourself with food and use your power to get what you want. Go ahead - show the world you're special and get everyone's attention. Go ahead - take power over the world and get your own way."

Part of the Tempter's role in our lives is to sow mistrust in God and God's way - to find the places of insecurity and call into question what we know to be true about God and ourselves. Each of the offers for Jesus is a way that he can turn away from trust in God.

Compare what Jesus is offered against how he teaches us to pray. First, "Turn these stones to bread" - "give us this day our daily bread." Then, "Jump off from this high place" - "deliver us from evil." And finally, "Worship me instead of God" - "hallowed by thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done."

He could choose to control the situation himself, but he chooses to trust in God's power and promises. He relies on what he knows is true and offers those promises of God as a way to voice his trust.

Jesus can resist the Tempter because he knows who he is. I bet he thought about the voice that called him “beloved” at his baptism. I bet he thought about the stories that his mother told him about those who worshiped him at his birth and afterward because he was the Son of God - the one they had waited for - who would bring hope and peace to the world.

Jesus can resist the Tempter because he is obedient to God. Obedience isn't a likable word for most of us. We don't want to obey anyone because it means that we're giving up control. But the call isn't to give up control to just anyone. We're giving up control to God - the only one who can be trusted with our lives.

Every day, God calls us back into God's care and invites us to allow God to shape our lives and our decisions. We can't rule the world, though to look around you might think we were trying. We always live under God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. And it demands our prayer, patience, and persistence to let God be God.

We are accepted because of God's love for us – not because of anything we've done or not done. We are accepted and able to stand before God because of grace – not cheap grace that allows us to control God – but grace that makes us new when we offer our whole selves to God with the confidence that God never abandons us.

This Communion meal is an opportunity to receive God's grace, to trust that God can work through even the simplest and most common elements like bread and cup, and to be in communion with God.

Giving up control is difficult, but it's where we begin. So come in faith and trust, and know that God is faithful.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.