

“Control”
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Hingham, Massachusetts
March 10, 2019

Luke 4:1-13

When we were teenagers, some of us were more rebellious than others. Some of us went to parties on the weekends at houses where there was no adult supervision, snuck out of the house at night, did things we knew our parents wouldn't approve of. Drinking, drugs, sex, etc.

Others of us played it a different way. We were the good kids. We were either too afraid or too smart (we thought) to get into trouble.

But no matter who we were, we found some way to make our parents crazy. My favorite way was to either tease or disagree openly with my dad at the dinner table. It drove him nuts. But I was always in by curfew!

Of course, this behavior is not only normal, it's essential. Teenagers *have* to differentiate themselves, one way or another, or they'll wind up being mindless younger versions of their parents.

What we resisted in those days was what we perceived as our parents' control over our lives. We wanted to make our own decisions. We wanted to be free.

Being controlling is not just restricted to parents, though, Many of us have had controlling bosses, controlling partners.

At the parsonage, it's my job to make dinner on most nights, but when Tracy cooks, I get so excited because she always makes something flavorful, colorful, and interesting. You would think by now that I'd learn to just leave her alone. But no, I always have to turn down the

stove or stir the pot or make some comment about the amount of liquid. I have trouble giving up control of the kitchen. Thankfully, she loves me and she forgives me — *after* unceremoniously kicking me *out* of the kitchen.

Control. It's *so* tempting! If only he or she would do it *my* way, everything would be fine.

The kitchen example is probably harmless, but, in an unhealthy way, trying to control people and situations *can* make us feel safe.

Psychologists tell us that addiction and eating disorders and other self-harming behaviors are connected to a desire for control.

Yes, this control thing can get *bad*. There are husbands, boyfriends, male partners of different kinds (yes, it's *men* most of the time) who push the people in their lives too hard. Push friends and family away. Withhold love. Take unyielding charge of the money. Even use physical violence to control their partners. It's *much* less often, but there are women who behave this way, too.

When I was a young minister, a guy in my church got really upset with me because someone had made an announcement that went on for way too long. Everyone felt it. I knew that the person making the announcement had worked against her own cause by going on and on. I had given her specific instructions on how long her announcement should be, but she went twice as long, maybe three times. The guy said to me, *You have to take control of worship!*

And I thought afterward, *No. No, I shouldn't*. I should *lead* worship, but never control it. Worship belongs to all of us, even those of us who are long-winded! And we all learn by making mistakes. I'm very interested in helping worship to be meaningful for everybody, but I will never try to control it — or any of you.

We've all heard stories of mob bosses who hold on to power with an iron grip. We know of the autocratic presidents and outright dictators around the world who use the powers of their office to force their will upon others, rather than working with partners inside and outside of government, listening to rivals, and building consensus.

According to Luke, Jesus had the chance to be one of those guys, right from the start.

Like all true heroes, Jesus has tests to pass before he can get started. John baptizes him and he heads into the desert, where he fasts for 40 days (wow) and *then* meets the devil. I know it's hard to imagine, especially because we don't really talk about a personification of evil here at HCC. But let's stick with the story. What's not hard to imagine is that someone as powerful as Jesus faces some serious temptations.

Many of us are familiar with this story. The devil offers Jesus three things in exchange for his loyalty and worship: bread, power, and safety.

Guaranteeing sustenance, what we all want and need to live. Assuring power over others, so he can have and do whatever he pleases. Guaranteeing security, which as humans, we crave because of our instinct to survive.

All of these temptations have to do with securing control over our lives and the lives of others.

And yet, Jesus chooses a different path. He resists the devil's offers. In order to be who he is, to do what he feels he is called to do, he must *give up* control rather than seize it. Even when he orders demons out of the possessed, he is doing so out of love, not out of the need to be in charge.

What about us? Are you tempted by control? How are you at letting go of control?

We might say to ourselves, *We are not the messiah; we can't all be heroes. Why not give in and accept some of what the devil offers Jesus? Surely, someone will make us an offer in one form or another?*

Then we remember what it costs us to be in control.

Bread: If we *always* get what we want and need, we lose touch with those who don't and can't; we get complacent, compulsive, entitled, perhaps addicted.

Power: Having true power over others is a corrupting force. Some people can handle it; most can't. Once we taste power, it's extremely difficult to stop trying to grasp more.

Safety: To be unable to be hurt would have robbed Jesus of his humanity. Risking injury was part of what it meant for him to live a life of sacrifice, of self-giving.

During the season Lent, we ask each other to go deeper. We challenge one another to ask who we want to be and how we believe we should be navigating our lives.

Control is *so* tempting! If only we could have control, we would be happy. All of our dreams and plans could come true.

One detail we should remember: There is no way we can have complete control. It's an illusion.

Maybe that's why Jesus was able to resist its allure. He knew it wasn't real, that it was impossible, that pursuing control can only cause heartache, break relationships, and set us up for failure.

And so he gave it up.

He never pushed people into believing a certain thing. He did ask the people around him to have faith, to love God and to love their neighbors. I believe he asks the same thing of us.

He didn't even take credit for healing people. Remember, he said, *Your faith has made you well*. And, as he came to the end of his ministry, his faith allowed him to give up control even to those who would betray him and kill him.

Without death, there is no resurrection. Without giving up control, there is no freedom.

One of my colleagues reminded me this past week that Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador only started speaking up for the marginalized when his friend was killed for doing the same. He could have kept his mouth shut, but he felt that telling the truth about the presence of evil made his life worth living, even if it ultimately cost him his life. This surrender of control led to his being able to live authentically.

In the end, faith of any kind, even the simplest expression of trust, is in great part all about *giving up* control to God. And in doing so, we allow ourselves to be led to a new life, a life which may include struggle, but a life very much worth living.

Amen