

## **Giving It Up: Control** Sunday, 3/5/17

**1** Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, the 40-day period, plus Sundays, leading up to Easter. The church has long lifted up Lent as time to prepare our hearts for the good news of the Easter resurrection by intentionally reflecting on our great need for God's grace and our own need and hope in resurrection. One of the spiritual disciplines most associated with Lent is fasting; that is, giving things up. In this age of social networking, OpenBible.info posts an annual Twitter tally, the Twitter Lent Tracker, of the top things people are fasting from each year. So far in 2017, the most popular response is, ironically, fasting from social networking, followed by more conventional food items such as chocolate, alcohol, and chips.

Fasting as a spiritual discipline seems to be on the decline in the United States. But fasting is still a valuable spiritual discipline, even more so if we reclaim its real purpose. Jeff Rainwater, commenting on the value of fasting, said "Fasting interrupts our daily lives and calls us to prayer." Doing without something during the season of Lent was never intended to impress God or punish the faithful. Rather, the goal of all our Lenten disciplines is to interrupt our busyness.

Today we begin a new worship series entitled "Giving It Up." Each week we'll be challenged to give up something that we don't normally associate with Lenten fasting: our anxious desire to control the people and circumstances of our lives; our rigid expectations of what our future holds; our feelings of superiority over other people and the ways they can poison our relationships; the feelings and attitudes regarding others that frames them as enemies instead of brothers and sisters; the best energy of our lives, poured out for others instead of hoarded for ourselves; our need for popularity and the approval of people; and ultimately, on Easter Sunday, our fear of death.

**2** This morning we focus on giving up our need for control, what one blogger elaborated as "power, influence, authority; the need to be right, to have the last word." I like to think of control more basically: Waking up in the morning, having a plan for the day, and being reasonably certain that the plan will unfold as intended. If we're honest with ourselves, we all want control over our lives. In one sense, God has indeed given us control over our day to day decisions and calls us to be good stewards of our lives. But in another sense, we

are called to surrender that control to God's purposes and God's timing. The Bible and our lives are full of examples of the disasters that result when we fail to surrender control to God. Our next Bible reading detail one such disaster. I'm reading from the NLT Bible, the first four verses of chapters 15 and 16 of Genesis.

**{Read Genesis 15:1-4, 16:1-4, NLT}**

**3** Abraham and Sarah, long since into what we'd consider today their retirement years and still without children, got impatient for God's fulfillment of their promised son, so they decided to wrest control from God and take things into their own hands. Not only did Hagar's resulting pregnancy sow discord into Abraham and Sarah's household, it produced Ishmael, described in the Bible as "a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him." When we rush God's timing or decide to do things our own way instead of God's way, we shouldn't be surprised to produce Ishmaels.

But really, as you look back on Abraham and Sarah, don't you feel a certain amount of sympathy with their plight? Who among us is really so good at waiting on God? Don't we all have plans- for our days, for our weeks, for our years, and perhaps even for our lives? How ready are we to have those plans interrupted? This past week, my wife Jana slipped on some stairs and fractured her leg. It will be two or three months before she can bear weight on that leg and drive again. If you've ever had an accident like that, then you know how hard it is to have your plans interrupted. Every detail of the day, the week, and the month gets set aside, whether you like it or not. Suddenly you're propelled into the radical present where you are aware of just how entirely dependent you are on God's grace to sustain you each moment. But oh, the pain of giving up control!

**4** Our insatiable need for control is a familiar one that goes all the way back to the second and third chapters of the Bible- Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Before the fateful decision to eat the fruit, there were no wilderness wanderings, no failed temptations, no need to confess and repent, no need for sack cloth and ashes. Just as the first temptation of Jesus in the wilderness wasn't primarily about eating bread, the temptation of Adam and Eve by the serpent wasn't mostly about their hunger for fruit. Their first temptation was to listen to counsel that came from someone other than God. Eve succumbed to this temptation when she listened to the serpent, and then Adam made the same crucial error when he

listened to Eve, disregarding what he already knew to be God's will: "[Y]ou must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." How much of the misery in our lives comes from that same crucial error? How much pain would be prevented if we heeded God's Word instead of taking the counsel of another who questioned God's motive, teaching, or wisdom?

The second temptation faced by Adam and Eve was one of control- the decision to attempt to wrest control of their lives from God by stealing knowledge that didn't belong to them and setting themselves up as judges of what is good and what is evil. Remember that prior to this event, Adam and Eve lived in a paradise that was completely good, including an unspoiled relationship with their creator. What Adam and Eve essentially did in taking the forbidden fruit was to say to God, "Thanks for everything, but you're not the boss of us!" We do the same thing today when we disregard God's will. "Thanks for everything, God, but you're not the boss of us!"

**5** I love retired United Methodist Pastor-Poet Ted Loder. Even when he's writing in prose, I feel that he's poetic. He hosts a wonderful blog subtitled, *Stay Watchful- God is sneaky!* In his March 11, 2010 posting, he offers the following thoughts on our need for control:

*It's about control, isn't it? We like to feel we're in control and none of us like things to be out of control, not for ourselves, or for anyone else around us because it makes us anxious. So we keep trying to control things, which includes controlling people, processes, outcomes. And yet, we can't!! Control is an illusion but an addictive one. And a destructive one! What we can control is ourselves, our actions, thinking, responses, how we deal with circumstances beyond our control. We can contribute, make some impact, help, innovate, interpret, share but not control. We can participate, engage, speak out, organize, negotiate, never play the victim, never blame, always accept responsibility for our mistakes, never assume all is lost when we don't get our own way and never give up doing whatever we really can and ought, then willingly paying the cost for our actions and trusting that however much or little it does to benefit the plural pronouns of life matters more than we know.*

This Lent we're all challenged to give up our need for control, letting it go and leaving

it behind in the spiritual wilderness before we end up driving off the road or running into someone along the way.

**6** The Serenity Prayer is likely one of the most known and most used prayers in and out of Christendom. It's a great prayer for anyone who struggles with trying to control people and circumstance. Theologian Frederik Buechner offers the following observations regarding the serenity prayer and a support group for adult children of alcoholics, originally published in the book, *Telling Secrets*:

*THEY COULD HARDLY be a more ill-assorted lot. Some are educated, and some never finished grade school. Some are on welfare, and some of them have hit the jackpot. Some are straight, and some are gay. There are senior citizens among them and also twenty-year-olds. Some groups are composed of alcoholics and some, like the ones I found my way to, of people who have no alcoholic problem themselves but come from families who did. The one thing they have in common can be easily stated. It is just that they all believe that they cannot live fully human lives without each other and without what they call their Higher Power...They are apt to begin their meetings with a prayer written by my old seminary professor Reinhold Niebuhr: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." They are apt to end with the Lord's Prayer: "thy will be done . . . give us this day our daily bread . . .forgive us as we forgive . . . deliver us."...*

*They also have slogans, which you can either dismiss as hopelessly simplistic or cling on to like driftwood in a stormy sea. One of them is "Let go and let God"—which is so easy to say and for people like me so far from easy to follow. Let go of the dark, which you wrap yourself in like a straitjacket, and let in the light. Stop trying to protect, to rescue, to judge, to manage the lives around you—your children's lives, the lives of your husband, your wife, your friends—because that is just what you are powerless to do. Remember that the lives of other people are not your business. They are their business. They are God's business because they all have God whether they use the word God or not. Even your own life is not your business. It also is God's business. Leave it to God. It is an astonishing thought. It can become a life-transforming thought.*

How many of you know that the Serenity Prayer is actually longer than the few verses

that we all now so well? The original prayer also included the following verses:

*Living one day at a time;  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world  
As it is, not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make all things right  
If I surrender to His Will;  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
And supremely happy with Him  
Forever and ever in the next.  
Amen.*

Isn't that a beautiful prayer? The longer version reminds us where the example and source of our serenity truly comes from- the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We find our serenity in our contentment to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. It's in resisting that path that most of us incur self-inflicted misery.

**7** Today, this very hour, is the right time to give up your need for control. Why not start with one particular thing- perhaps a specific relationship or a situation you're trying to control at home or at work. Write that down on your phone or on one of the colored index cards and keep it before yourself in prayer this week, surrendering control to God.

In the same blog I referenced earlier, Ted Loder included this prayer of letting go, excerpted from his wonderful book, *Guerrillas of Grace*. I invite you to close your eyes and join your heart with mine now as we pray this together:

*O God, it is hard for me to let go, most times, and the squeeze I exert garbles me and gnarls others. So, loosen my grip a bit on the good times, on the moments of sunlight and star shine and joy, that the thousand graces they scatter as they pass may nurture growth in me rather than turn to brittle memories. Loosen my grip on those grudges and grievances I hold so closely that I may risk exposing myself to the spirit of forgiving and forgiveness that changes things and resurrects dreams and courage. Loosen my grip on my fears that I may be released a little into humility and into an acceptance of my humanity ...Loosen my grip on my ways and words ... that letting go into the depths of silence and my own uncharted longing, I may find myself held by you and linked anew to all life in this wild and wondrous world you love so much. so I may take to heart that you have taken me to heart. Amen!*



***Buffalo United Methodist Church***  
*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*



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