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Lent: Give up your need for control  
Martin Grove United Church  
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Based on Luke 13:31-35

This Lent we are working around the dual themes of temptation and giving up something for Lent. And by giving something up for Lent, I do not mean simple things that will make no real difference to your life, like chocolate. I mean important things that may allow you to find new life. Important things that may help you connect with the peace of God in deep ways. Important things that many help you understand the term “resurrection” in a new way this year. In our society we often feel that our life would be better if we had more - like wanting more money. Or - as a completely random example - wanting a bass guitar to compliment our guitar group. But in truth for most of us, what will make our lives better is usually NOT having more. For most of us the thing that would make our lives better is to have less. But less of the right things. You know, less of the things that weigh you down, like negativity, resentment, anger, feelings of superiority, feelings of inferiority. Giving up something for Lent actually makes good sense.

So a few weeks ago I imagined the theme of this service being “Lent: Give up your need for control.” It sounded great as a headline. But what does it mean? First off, giving up your need for control does not mean giving up control. I am not advocating that we all become mindless wanderers that simply do anything that other people tell us to do. The problem with needing control is ... hang on.

Before we go there. Who here this morning wants to believe that you are in control of your own life? Who here this morning IS in control of your own life? Really? So you decided to be born female or male? You decided exactly how old you want to be today? You decided what country to be born into? You decided what culture to be born into? You decided what religion to be born into? You decided for yourself whether you would be born into a poor or rich family? A poor or rich society?

Nobody is truly in control of their own life. We see that in our Luke reading too.

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Jesus wants to be as a hen protecting her brood in Jerusalem, but the chicks - the people - constantly go their own way. Jesus would not, could not, or did not control the people, and simply had to live with deep feelings of longing and regret. Jesus imagines something for the people better than they can imagine for themselves, and so Jesus grieves for the people. Even Jesus was not in control in the sense we mean it here. Jesus really wanted the people to behave, but he had to give up his need to control them.

I think I'd better be a bit more precise in my language here. I am a huge fan of self-control. Whenever we talk about giving up our own need for control, it is wanting to control other people or situations that we have to curb. Self-control is still a good thing. One example of this comes from the game of cricket which must be one of the strangest games I know. One really strange aspect of the game is called "sledging" where opposing players are invited - as part of the normal process of the game - to verbally abuse their opponents. The whole intention is to emotionally upset your opponent. To distract them from the task at hand and hopefully to cause them to under-perform. And that's called a game! In those cases, one can only hope that players are in control of themselves, that they remind themselves that sledging is part of the game, that they don't take the comments personally, that they don't get bent out of shape. Being in control of yourself is fine. And because of a quirk in human nature, when people say they want more control, they almost never mean that they want more self-control - which is a real pity because self-control is the only type of control we can actually ... control.

I'm reminded of a story about an office employee in a large company. The employee started working for the company with high hopes, not only for meaningful work, but for friendships and new relationships. But they soon discovered that many of the employees created a very toxic work environment. There was lots of negative talk. There was a lot of gossip. There was tons of drama. There was lots of back-stabbing and politics. The employee had tried having constructive conversations with their fellow workers, and gave them lots of advice on how they could behave better, but nobody seemed even interested in having a less toxic workplace. So, after awhile, the employee went to HR and said, "I really can't take it here, I have to quit". The HR person asked why, and the employee named in great detail the nature of the toxic work environment,

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none of which was news to the HR person.

The HR person said, well if you want to leave, you can do so of course, but first, I would like to request that you perform one short task. What's the task? I want you to take a glass and fill it to the brim with water. Then, walk around your work floor 3 times without spilling a single drop of water. The employee thought this was a very strange request, but they respected the HR person and figured this task would only take a moment anyway. So the employee filled a glass of water - right to the brim - and made 3 laps around their work floor without spilling a drop. The employee then went back to HR to report their success. HR asked, while you were walking around your work floor with the glass of water did you notice any back-stabbing? The employee answered, no. Did you see anyone gossiping? No. Did you notice any toxic behaviours? No. Did you see any drama? No. Do you know why you didn't see any bad behaviours? No. HR said, when you walked with your very full glass of water, trying to not spill a drop, you focused on your task at hand and didn't have any energy to waste on seeing what other people around you were doing. That's why you didn't notice any toxic behaviours. And if you did the same thing in your job - focused on your own work - you would not notice toxic behaviours either, or at least what you did notice would affect you far less. To improve your work environment you do not need to control all your co-workers - you just need to control yourself and focus on your job. The employee stayed and made a wonderful career in that company.

When we focus on our own priorities, we don't have the time or energy to pay attention to all the drama around us, the mistakes that other people make, the gossip, politics, negativity, etc. Toxic people are everywhere. If we focus on our own priorities, our own growth, our own excellence, then we won't be as much affected by the negativity that is around us.

That's true on the job. It's also true in life. It has been said that, "Being a male or female is a matter of birth. Being a man or a woman is a matter of age. Being a gentleman or gentle woman, that is a matter of personal choice." A great personality is not born in the maternity ward, it is born by the choices that we make - or don't make. We really do have lots of choices we can make. And one choice we can make is to give

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up our need for control.

But why are we driven to control things in the first place? Psychologists seem to converge on 2 main theories. One theory is that the need for control comes from a time in your life when something bad happened because you - or perhaps a parent - couldn't control something and things did not turn out well in the end. The other theory is that the need for control comes because we fundamentally believe that the universe is out to get us, and that our whole lives we live in a defensive posture, where control is important.

Or perhaps you have your own theory.

I still carry memories of a person I used to visit in prison. I saw him weekly for about 7 months, so we got to know each other relatively well. This guy was like an Ox. He was shorter than me but I think he could bench press my car. He told me he could drop and do 400 pushups, and I believed him. He was tough. He was impenetrable. Which is actually what I should have expected for someone who was seriously let down and left to defend himself from the age of 4. He literally had to be tough or die. When I met him he was really into control. And my main journey with him was re-directing his need for control into an ability to exercise self-control. Control freaks are not always bad people. Sometimes they are just good people who are terrified of being hurt, based on past experiences.

Regardless of what theory you are thinking of right now, the main driver behind the need for control is usually fear. So giving up our need for control involves giving up - or at least learning to live with - our fears. Hey - I never said this would be easy! And if that sounds too scary or difficult for you, consider plan B, which is to morph your need to control other people into building up and celebrating your own self-control.

This is starting to sound a bit theoretical, but I know for a fact that dealing with loss of control is something we all know about considering what happened over the last 2 weeks here at MGUC. Some of us have been more involved than others, but it was an interesting experience to have no electrical power at the church for 8 days and to have to decide what to do about it. I am so grateful that Jack and others dealt with the operational aspects of dealing with the building. Personally, I had enough entertainment rescheduling events, imagining how to keep doing things that are important to this

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church, arranging a Sunday service where we would not just feel like strangers watching someone else's service, dealing with the fact that ready or not, Lent is here. And personally, I think we rolled with reality fairly well. But last Tuesday I was getting a bit bothered not knowing if we would have heat for our lenten group or not. So I exchanged my need for electrical control into a very simple form of self-control, and decided we could hold our lenten meeting at the Woodbine Mall. I couldn't control the electrical power. But I did choose to decide what was important to us, which was that we needed to get together somewhere. I just had to take a "picnic" approach to the lenten group. So I did. We can rejoice that 12 people joined in our ad-hoc party at the Woodbine Mall. And we can rejoice even more loudly that our power is back, our heat is back, and we are back to normal. I am grateful that hosting a meeting at a shopping mall is now just a point I can make in a sermon, it is not our new normal. Thanks be to God!

For some people, giving up your need for control starts by being reminded that you are not in control anyway. You only have to give up something you don't even have. And focus on your priorities. That's a great message for Lent too. As our spiritual journey through the weeds of Lent continues, focus on your priorities and the details just might take care of themselves, or at least affect you less.

The lenten journey continues. What will you give up this week? What will you give up that will give you more joy, more of the peace of God?

*Amen.*