
Lent: Give up your need for control
Sydenham-Heritage 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 up something for Lent, I do not mean simple things that will make no real difference to our lives, like chocolate. I mean important things that may allow us to find new life. Important things that may help us connect with the peace of God in deep ways. Important things that may help us understand the word “resurrection” in a new way this year. In our society we often feel that our lives would be better if we had more - like wanting more money. Or - as a completely random example - me wanting a new bicycle with hydraulic disc brakes. 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. Less of the things that weigh us down. Things like negativity, resentment, anger, being judgemental, feelings of superiority, feelings of inferiority, or perhaps something else that is causing you pain. 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 in practice? First off, giving up our 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 ... well, hang on a bit.

Before we go there. Who here this morning believes that you are in control of your own life? Who here this morning IS in control of your own life? Really? Did you decide what gender you wanted to be born? Did you decide exactly how old you want to be today? Did you decide what time of day you want it to be right now? Did you decide your skin colour? Did you decide what country to be born into? Did you decide what culture to be born into? Did you decide what religion to be born into? Did you decide for yourself whether you would be born into a poor family or a rich family?

Nobody is truly in control of their external reality. We see that in our Luke reading too.

[image: hen with chicks under wing]

Jesus wants to be like a hen protecting her brood, but the chicks - the people of Jerusalem - constantly go their own way. Jesus would not, could not, and did not control the people. Jesus lives 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. Jesus really wanted the people to behave. But Jesus had to give up - or at least learn to live with - his desire to control the people.

I think I'd better be a bit more precise in my language here. Because I want to be clear that I am a huge fan of self-control. Self-control is a good thing.

[image: sledging]

One example of this comes from the game of cricket which must be one of the strangest games I know. One really unusual 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! We 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 do not get bent out of shape. Being in control of yourself is fine.

[image: self control]

But here we come head-to-head with a quirk of human nature. When people say they want more control in life, they almost never mean that they want more self-control. People who say they want more control in life usually mean they want to control other people. They want to control external reality. Which is a real pity because self-control is the only type of control we can always ... control.

Consider this story. I shared this very short story with you 2 years ago, but this time I want us to hear the elements of self-control - or lack of self-control - in the story. The stories depicts two scenes in a movie. In one scene, a person is telling a work friend

about what happened to him the previous evening. He says, “Last night I had a wonderful evening. My wife and I went out for a romantic dinner. After dinner, we walked for over an hour. When we got home we lit candles all over the house. It was a perfect evening”. In the other scene, a person is telling a work friend about what happened to her the previous evening. She says, “Last night I had a terrible evening. They cut off our electricity so my husband and I couldn’t make dinner and had to eat out. The meal was more expensive than we expected so we couldn’t afford a cab and we had to walk home. When we got home it was dark because there was no power and were forced to put candles everywhere. It was a disaster”. Those two scenes sound like they are unrelated. But the man and the woman are actually married to each other. The two movie scenes show the man and the woman describing the exact same evening. They both walked equally far. They both sat in the same candlelight. They both were not really in control of many aspects of their evening. They honestly could not pay the power bill. They could not afford the cab. Many external factors were not in the control of either the woman or the man. And yet, one of them had a wonderful evening. And one of them had a terrible evening.

I encourage us all to not nit-pick the story but instead to let the teachings of the story sink in. Deeply. If we choose to exercise our own self-control, we can enjoy life well. If we let external things dictate our feelings, we will be miserable.

[image: serenity prayer]

A similar idea is embodied in the serenity prayer which is commonly quoted as, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”.

It has been said that, “Being male or female is a matter of chance. Being a man or a woman is a matter of age. But 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 do not make. We really do have a lot of choices we can make. And one choice we can make is to focus on self-control, and give up our need to control other people.

[image: life choices]

I still carry memories of a person I used to visit with in prison. I saw him weekly for about 7 months, so I got to know him quite 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 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 his growing 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. Other times, of course controlling people are manipulators we should avoid. [image: choices you make]

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 our lives when something bad happened because we - or if we were young perhaps a parent - could not control something. And things did not turn out well. 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 need to live in a defensive posture, therefore control is seen as important. Or perhaps you have your own theory.

Regardless of what theory you are thinking of right now, the main driver behind our need for control is usually fear. When Jesus wanted to protect his little flock, he was fearful for them. Jesus feared that his flock would not learn what they needed to while Jesus was still with them. 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 transform your need to control other people into building up and celebrating your own self-control.

This is starting to sound a bit theoretical. But in fact, I think our need for control is very familiar to us all. The pandemic has affected each of us in different ways, but there is no question we have all responded by trying to shore up parts of our lives where we wanted to feel that we had some amount of control. Because COVID - and the necessary restrictions caused by COVID took away a lot of our control. The pandemic

was an external force that created a great deal of fear of loss of control. For us as individuals. And for us as a congregation. In some ways, our reaction to the pandemic can be summarized by the quote,

[image: sails]

“We can complain about the wind. Or we can learn to adjust our sails.”

The pandemic has been like the wind in the quote. It has not been in our power to control it. And many of us have complained about it. Repeatedly. But throughout the pandemic we have been invited to learn to adjust our sails. Adjusting our sails - as a metaphor - is about how we have chosen to make changes in order to make our lives keep working. And again, this has been true for us as individuals, and for us as a congregation. During the pandemic, we have not missed a single worship service. And personally, I can tell you that I have led all of the group activities I would have put on with or without the pandemic. And please stay for our Annual Meeting to hear more about what Sydenham-Heritage United Church has been up to not only during, but in spite of the pandemic. Yes, our methods had to change. We did need to learn to adjust our sails. Many events moved online and had to be adapted in order to work properly online. But we have chosen to remember what it is that is important to us. Our relationships. And our caring for each other and our community. The pandemic did not have the power to change that. That is something that we do control ourselves. The pandemic caused us to lose control in many ways. But we have always been open to the possibility of self-control.

And I just want to take the sailing analogy a little bit further. Yes, it is true that we cannot control the winds. And yes it is true that we can learn to adjust our sails. But it is also true that it is in fact the wind itself that teaches us how to adjust our sails. I love sailing myself. And my sailing teacher was the wind. We can run away from our misfortunes. Or we can choose to learn from them. I hope we always try to learn. The pandemic has also been a great teacher. The pandemic has helped us realize what it is that we really care about. Isolation and loneliness are not new things. At all. But the pandemic brought those into much sharper focus. Perhaps we will take that teaching forwards with us as open up more and decide what sort of events to put our efforts into here @ SHUC.

We long for control in life. But we do not need to control external reality

perfectly. We need to be masters of self-control, and to learn what we can from reality - particularly when we do not like it. And what will we do with our self-control? Perhaps we can focus on what matters most. Our relationships, and our caring for each other and our community. In the end, what else do we really need?

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? What will you give up so that you can understand the word “resurrection” in a new way this year? Let’s give up our need for control.

Amen.