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Lent: Give up your need for control  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
March 16, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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. 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 is needing control. And 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? Really? 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 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 reading from

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Luke 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 being disappointed 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.

I point that out because human nature tends to tell us the opposite. 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.

[image: office building]

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. 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, 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 ask you to perform one short 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

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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 toxic behaviours? The employee answered, “no”. HR said, right, 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 did not 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 impact 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. If we focus on our own priorities, our own growth, our own peace of mind, then we won’t be as much impacted by the negativity that is around us.

Do you really want more control in your life? Start by working on self-control. In fact, here’s a fun little exercise you can try next time it rains.

[image: sad person walking in the rain]

Next time it rains, go for a walk. While you are walking, remind yourself repeatedly how much you hate the rain. How much you hate getting wet. How much you look down on people who are forced to walk in the rain. Walk for at least 20 minutes. And make sure that you are miserable while you do it.

[image: happy person walking in the rain]

Then, turn around and head back home along the same route. As you return, remind yourself of how much you loved the rain when you were a kid. You are already soaked, so go ahead and splash in the puddles. Skip. Sing. Dance. Relish the feel of the cool fresh rain hitting your face. Open yourself to the joys of walking in the rain. And make sure that you feel happy while you do it.

Seriously. Try this little exercise some time and let me know how you feel about it. Or alternatively, tell me how you feel about me for suggesting the exercise.

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[image: sad and happy people walking in the rain]

The point is that the difference between the person who is sad in the rain and the person who is happy in the rain has nothing to do with the rain. It's the same rain! The difference is our ability to let go of our need to control everything and to be simply present in the moment. The simple truth is that if we choose to exercise our own self-control, we can enjoy life well. If we let external things dictate our feelings to us, we may be miserable much of the time.

If that exercise sounds too forced to you, let me share a true story with you.

[image: hospital]

As a minister I have made many hospital visits of course. I remember in a former congregation a period of about 5 week when I visited 2 members of the congregation who were in the same hospital at the same time. Over those 5 weeks I got to know them both quite well. Not only were they in the same hospital, they had the same medical condition. They were on same floor. They were in the same unit. They were in fact right across the hall from each other. They had the same nursing staff. They got the same food. They had visits from the same minister. Their family and social situations were similar too. They were about equally resourced. They both had a daughter who lived close by and visited every day. They both had a son who lived further away and visited once a week.

From an external perspective, these two people were in very similar situations. But when I visited them, they were in completely different worlds.

[image: sad and happy people walking in the rain]

One person complained about absolutely everything. The nurses were terrible. The food was atrocious. Their family never came to see them. This person actually told me - while I was visiting her - that she never got any visits. The person never asked about their church friends or anyone else and was completely absorbed in their own selves.

The other person was grateful for just about everything. They would not stop talking about the wonderful visits they had, from their family and from me. They reported getting excellent care from the nurses and other hospital staff. They always asked me about their church friends and how they were doing. They always asked how I was doing. They expressed their caring for other people. Their love emanated from their hospital bed

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like a beacon. And yes, they even reported that the food was actually pretty good.

I remember those visits well. I gave each of them the same amount of time and caring every week. And I learned a lot about the value of self-control. Self-control helped the one person find inner peace during their hospital stay. And self-control helped me provide equally good pastoral care to both of the church members.

[image: life choices]

I also remember a person I used to visit 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.

[image: choices we 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. That was certainly the case for my friend in prison. 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 learn 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.

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This might sound a bit theoretical. But in fact, this is something we are all quite familiar with. Think back to the pandemic days. Particularly the early days of the pandemic.

The pandemic was an external force that created a great deal of fear and loss of control. For me, I summarize the pandemic this way:

[image: adjust our sails]

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

During the pandemic we all learned to adjust our sails. And then adjust them again. And again. And again. For those of us who were willing to adjust our sails, we got quite a bit of practice!

Many times in our lives external forces create fear and loss of control in us. The pandemic is one example. Other examples include prolonged illnesses. Death of a loved one. Relationship issues. Forced unemployment. Lots of things really. Many people are fearful right now because of the tariff insanity that may or may not be happening with our friends to the south. Many things really can cause fear and loss of control in our lives.

Those external factors are like the wind. They are beyond our control. But when we are sailing, we can adapt and adjust our sails. And if we do, we can still get to where we need to go.

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 - you may ask - how do we learn to adjust our sails? I used to sail myself. And I learned to sail from ... the wind. When external forces threaten us, we can run away from our misfortunes. Or we can choose to learn from them. I hope we always try to learn from our misfortunes.

[image: self control]

We long for control in life. But we do not need to control external reality completely. We need to be masters of self-control, and to learn what we can from reality - especially reality that 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?

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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? This week, let’s give up our need for control. This week, let’s work on our self-control.

*Amen.*