

Giving Up Control

Luke Bushman; Matthew 4:1-11

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. We participated in Ash Wednesday a bit early this year so we could discuss it on a Sunday. It's funny how things go over your head as a kid. I participated in Lent most years as a kid, usually giving up Facebook or video games. I can honestly say that this year I still had to sit down and research the significance of Lent, and found that it is a lot more than giving something up for 40 days to focus on Jesus. The duration of Lent comes from the 40 days Jesus was in the desert, and tempted, which is the scripture we are exploring this morning. Lent is a time to acknowledge Jesus' humanity as well as our own. We are fragile, broken, hurt, and sinful, and Jesus chose to step into our world, and sit with us. Kate Bowler, whose Lent guide I have been using, summarizes lent by calling it "A time when we all get a minute to tell the truth: Life is so beautiful and life is so hard. For everyone." I think a lot of the time we can use religion to escape these hard truths. Lent is a time where we try to acknowledge them.

I have read about the temptation of Jesus many times through the years, and always came to the conclusion that this passage showed the humanity of Jesus. Even Jesus was tempted, just like you and me. Kate Bowler's sermon guide for this passage however, touched on themes I had never connected to this passage. Perfectionism, limitations, and control. Without simply regurgitating her words, I would like to talk about these themes this morning.

Jesus is tempted by three things in this passage: food, safety, and political power. Jesus has a chance to avoid hunger, keep himself from harm, and control the world around him. Jesus turns this down. I think this is because unfortunately part of the human experience is having things happen beyond our control. If Jesus never had to worry about his sustenance, his safety or his surroundings, Jesus would be missing out on a crucial part of humanity. Except this is a part of humanity I think we would all like to miss out on.

I think I often minimize how tempting Satan's offers to Jesus are. I read this, and initially I am like "Well duh Jesus isn't going to listen to Satan, that never ends well". And it isn't like Jesus was tempted with a Big Mac, it was just some bread made out of rocks. As I thought about this more, I realized how hard it would be to actually turn down that offer. I started thinking on a personal level how simple and peaceful life would be if I was powerful enough to control my sustenance, safety, and surroundings. What would I have to worry about?

Now this is obviously hypothetical, there will never be a time in life where I control all aspects of my world. But I think we as people sometimes try to control as much as we can. Not necessarily because we are villainous, and want to force others to do our every whim, but because we feel this anxiety about how little control we have. We chase this control in a lot of different ways.

When CoVid-19 first hit, I saw myself and others trying to maintain control over our lives in an uncontrollable situation. I knew people who held onto this control of their lives, by trying to let the pandemic affect them as little as possible. They tried to go about as much of their regular business as they could. I on the other hand shrunk my world down to something easier to control in the midst of the chaos. I pretty much never left the house. In fact I was so stressed for a while I started walking my dog late at night instead of during the day so I wouldn't encounter people.

I remember in this stress, Becca sending me a picture of what I could control, and what I couldn't control in the midst of this outbreak. That really changed my outlook, and over the next while I would hear the same thing from mentors and counselors in my life: "You can only control you".

However, even if we accept that we can only control ourselves, our fight for control can still leave us hurt. This concept is courtesy of Kate

Bowler that we often get the idea in our head that if we can be perfect our lives will also be perfect. The problem is, we can never be perfect. Here is a direct quote from Kate Bowler's lenten guide.

Our culture tries to convince us that perfection is possible if we just try a little harder. We can have it all if we just master our mornings or reach that elusive inbox zero. We'll feel better if we take that pilates class or start juicing. Our families will be happier if we read this book or go on that vacation. But what if things are not getting better... no matter how hard we try?

Kate Bowler

I believe in trying to grow and develop as humans, but it truly is impossible to obtain a perfect life, through perfectionism. Life is messy, it doesn't go to plan, and we are all different. There have been countless perfectionists throughout history, and not one of them had a perfect life that they were able to control.

Many times throughout my life, I have tried to be perfect in various situations. When I was in middle school, I wanted to escape a lot of the hurt I felt, so I tried to become a perfect soccer player. I spent hours practicing hoping to be the best, and to be able to control my life and future by being good at soccer. I cannot count the amount of hours I obsessed about becoming a great soccer player, before I broke my leg, and realized I can't control everything. When I used to work at Bible Camp, I became obsessed with being the most perfect, most selfless cabin leader. At the end of every week as the kids were leaving, I would think about every moment where I wasn't fully present with the kids in my cabin and feel guilty. Often kids were going home to not ideal situations, and I think I tried to be perfect in an attempt to escape this reality. When I was in college, I tried to get perfect

grades, volunteer in many ways, and be very involved with school events. I was trying to be perfect at this to cover the anxiety I was feeling. Trying to be perfect, to achieve a perfect life is tiring, and futile. It seems oftentimes perfectionism is a defense against the lack of control in our lives.

I still struggle with being a textbook people pleaser, but I have moved past using perfectionism as a means of gaining control of my life. Or maybe in five years I will realize I have been trying to be perfect at something else.

What helped me stop trying to gain control over my world via perfection, was listening to affirmations from friends, family and my counselor. People who I let in, and not only encouraged me in what I was doing well, but also reminded me that I have value even when I make mistakes. Even on days where it just isn't my day.

There are many ways we struggle to achieve absolute control of our lives. Perfectionism is just one of these many ways. Jesus modeled relinquishing control by living a human life. The temptation of Jesus reminds us how tempting it can be to fight for control of our lives. This Lent season I hope we can acknowledge our humanity. Acknowledge that our lives are difficult. I hope in this acknowledgement we can move away from grasping for control and move towards trusting in God with our sustenance, safety and surroundings.

I encourage you this week to think about how we can follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and give up control in different aspects of our lives. What can we give up to help us remember God is the one who is truly in control of our lives.