

Mid-Week Lent 2021
“Giving Up Control”
St. John’s Lutheran, Grove City OH
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Matthew 4:1-11
February 24, 2021

Our Lenten theme for these midweek services this year is “Giving it Up.” I think it really speaks to the times we’re living in. When we hear, “giving it up, it’s natural to think “I’ve been defeated, I’ve got to throw in the towel.” Or we think, “Oh, now I have to *go without*...I have to go without something that I really wanted or needed.” Giving it up has those negative connotations...like we’re beaten or we’ve lost something. And who needs more of that these days, right?

Well, we’re not going to sugarcoat anything that scripture tells us on this score. Jesus regularly tells us, in various ways, that we *do* need to give up our lives. As in die. So, there’s that. He says, for example, “whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” He says, “Unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” As we Lutherans know so well, Christian life is a process of dying daily into Jesus’ death—dying to our selves—and rising up as a new person, remade in his image. That’s our daily baptismal journey. It’s a blessed journey, a journey filled with joy, but it’s certainly not always going to feel good. For one thing, when Jesus says we need to lose our lives for his sake, that means *everything*: the good as well as the bad. Remember, he said “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Here’s he’s purposely talking about the people we love, who are closest to us. And he’s *wedging* himself in there between us, and *everything else*. He stubbornly insists on getting in my way, when I’m grabbing at other stuff—including the people I love most—for security.

For me, my go-to image of giving things up, which has always helped me understand what Jesus is saying here, is not just giving things up, but rather switching dance partners. Karen and I took ballroom dancing lessons for a while; she was great at it but I think she got tired of all the bruises on her feet I was giving her, so we quietly stopped. At any rate, in ballroom dancing, obviously, you can only embrace one partner at a time. Jesus is very clear on this, too—he says you cannot serve two masters. When Jesus tells me to let go of my life, which includes everything: my family, my career, my money, etc., he’s

really telling me I need to switch dance partners. He's not just telling me to let go and die and be defeated. He's pointing me towards the beautiful thing he's done for me on his cross and with his resurrection. He has come to be our new dance partner.

Today we're talking specifically about giving up **control**. So the dance analogy is great. Jesus has come not only to save us, but he's also come to take the lead, so we can mirror him, follow him in our day-to-day lives. For believers, giving up control doesn't mean we're not dancing anymore. Rather, it means that control is not the issue for us anymore. We're not dancing to control anything anymore. The dance floor is not ours to control. We're not the ones finding our way across to the other side of the floor. Jesus is guiding us over there, we're just mirroring his actions and following his steps.

For example: To give up control over our money is not to give up responsibility for our financial decisions. God wants us to take full responsibility for our wealth, and to make wise decisions on how we use it. I think that means we should be intentional about every penny we spend, as far as we have the energy. We never abdicate that responsibility. The difference is: are we trying to be self-sufficient gods with our money, or are we mirroring our dance-partner's lead when it comes to how we look at our money and use it. In other words: Jesus has control of the dance. He's the one who's going to bring whatever fruit grows out of our garden, whatever it is. We can manage the small decisions from day to day. That's very different than trying to control the whole dance.

There's a dark biblical truth that goes along with that: when we try to take over God's position on the dance floor, whatever it is we're using, trying to control the dance (our money, for example), starts to control us. We find out we've danced ourselves into the arms of a bigger power, who couldn't care less about us. In trying to be miniature gods, trying to control all aspects of our own lives, we find ourselves helpless in the arms of a really powerful enemy.

We see it in the Genesis lesson, where Adam and Eve get bamboozled by the serpent into eating the fruit that God told them not to eat. He lies to them, basically saying if you eat this fruit you can control the whole dance. You can write the music, supply the life and energy, and also control the outcome of the

dance. And you know what: even when we are living in the glory of heaven, we will never have that kind of power.

And the really tragic thing is how the hateful serpent threw Eve into doubt about who she already was: “Eat this and you will be like God.” As if she wasn’t like God already! God had created Eve in his own image, and he adored his daughter! She was already like God. But the serpent confused her into thinking that her likeness to God meant to be self-sufficient, as in having God’s power, his *control*. And that was never going to be the case. Make no mistake; you and I are *like* God: he built us to pour ourselves out in love like he does, and to exercise loving dominion over the works of his hands. He created us to be royal stewards of his creation. But the serpent made Eve doubt her own royalty. That’s the doubt he tries to sow in you and me. What’s more infuriating to a parent than to hear someone say our child is less, in any way, than what he or she is? The serpent hatefully introduced that doubt into our mother’s heart: “I’m lacking.” And when I’m living in that fear—that I’m lacking all the time—that’s when I start believing the lie that I’m here in this world to become completely self-sufficient. The lie that I **can be** self-sufficient. Of course, the moment she and Adam tried to become self-sufficient, the moment they tried to take full control, they were going to experience life as a curse. From that point onward, they’d have to fight a losing battle just sustain themselves.

What a contrast with Jesus, in the Matthew lesson...the temptation of Jesus. The same serpent is doing everything he can to make Jesus take God’s power to himself, and Jesus refuses to do it. The irony is thick: a complete reversal of Adam and Eve. They were human beings trying to take God’s power to themselves. Here, the 2nd person of the Holy Trinity is refusing to take divine power—power that rightly belongs to him—he refuses to take it to himself; and by doing that, he’s showing himself to be both the perfect human being, 100% obedient to the Father, completely dependent upon his Father, and also fully God! That’s a mind-bender for us! Jesus came to give his life and his power away on the cross, as only God can, for us sons and daughters of Adam. In emptying himself of all power and control on the cross, Jesus becomes the model of the human being that you and I can live towards every day; he became one of us, and you and I can dance with him.

Today, with so much turmoil and disaster and polarization in the world, what we’re talking about here is a very real issue. I don’t know about you, but this giving up control has become a major challenge, part of

my daily spiritual warfare right now. As believers, we are completely responsible for the small amount of power we have in our day-to-day decisions and actions. But the temptation, especially in these times, is to grasp for a control that I never will have, in this world or the next. I want to control the dance. I want to write the music, supply the power, and control every outcome of what I'm seeing out there in the world. So why are you all not behaving?! Why aren't "they"—out there—doing what I want? It's no wonder there's such a feeling of helplessness out there in the world right now, and so much anger.

Well, you and I can be grateful. There's a transformational blessing in all of this turmoil and frustration, you know. Now that we've met our New Dance Partner, now that he has cut in, now that he has wedged himself in between us and all the other dancers, we can let go of our need to control the whole dance. Right now. Tonight. We can let all of this turmoil drive us into the arms of our new partner. He's written a new song for us, that takes up all our sorrows into its melody and makes even our sorrows beautiful. And the ending is awesome. What a transfiguring joy it is—especially these days—that we're able to move across the dance floor just one step at a time—just one small step at a time—following his lead to total victory.