



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Giving It Up: Control”

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-8

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What are you giving up for Lent? In many Christian traditions believers give up something for these 40 days. Popular Lent fasts include chocolate, alcohol, Facebook, Twitter, meat, sweets, coffee, and fizzy drinks. Giving up such things can be beneficial. When we stop something we enjoy, when we intentionally deprive ourselves, we may discover a new awareness, more internal space to nourish our spiritual lives, to pay attention to God.

One year I gave up desserts for Lent. The deprivation jolted my routine. Meals ended sooner. I felt empty. It was tough to watch family and friends enjoy ice cream. At home I kept an eye on the Graeter’s Black Raspberry Chocolate Chip, afraid it might have freezer burn before I got to it. But I needn’t have worried, because it disappeared altogether! After a week or so without desserts I started noticing richer flavors in regular foods. I also felt emptiness, a chosen but disconcerting emptiness. The practice of giving something up did remind me of Lent; that during this purple season I, we, have a place in a 40-day pilgrimage, stretching back through the centuries and around the globe, a pilgrimage of people trying to follow Jesus.

For the next five weeks our theme in preaching is “Giving It Up.” Our sermon series takes the idea of giving up something for Lent to another level. Each week we’ll talk about something we think God wants us to give up in order to live a deeper life: hard things, human things. Today’s topic is control.

In our scripture reading God gives Adam permission to eat from every tree except one—*every tree, except one*. What trouble we have being told, “This far, and no farther!” A limit imposed is a limit challenged. Picture a two-year-old child. That third year of life isn’t called the terrible twos for nothing. How often have we watched young children insist on crossing the line, pushing over the plant, inserting a finger in an electrical socket, only to be confronted with consequences beyond their imagining.

All of us seek and exert control. To be human is to want to control all we can. We each know people who devote energy to keeping their personal environments organized. They value living amidst beauty and serenity and order. Control helps us order our and declutter our lives.

And then there are those people who can’t stop themselves from “helping” other people drive. They tell them when to turn, where to park, even remind them that the traffic light has changed. I am one of those people—my name is Ann and I have control issues—I’m human. At times, I have been over the top with my directives, not with our teenage son, as you might expect, but with my spouse, who is a very safe driver! Conversations from those times lead me to think I need to be listening to this sermon, not giving it!

To be human is to want to control as much as we can. So I have a few questions for you. If you answer yes to any of them, you join me in having issues with control. ¹

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brainsnacks/201006/are-you-control-freak-take-quiz-and-find-out>

Do you have a certain way that you like certain tasks to be done? I've heard more than a few people in this very church say that there is only one correct way to load a dishwasher!

Do you find it hard to admit making mistakes, to admit being wrong or misinformed about something, or to admit acknowledging that you've changed your mind?

Do you become irritable, angry, or anxious when someone or something makes you late, when things don't start on time, or things don't go according to plan? For example, if a worship service ends after 12 o'clock?

Do you dislike depending on others, accepting help from them, or allowing them to do things for you? Situations like these push our control buttons. Few of us want to appear needy, or to be the center of attention. We resist being seen as vulnerable. Our dislike of dependence is all about control. It's a human issue.

Back to Adam and Eve. In the Garden of Eden, they've only got one rule to follow, and they break it. Things get confused and chaotic after they eat the fruit. They somehow manage to sew fig leaves together to hide their nakedness. They want to be self-sufficient and independent, and know good and evil. They dislike depending on God for anything and everything. They insist on their own way. When things don't go according to plan, they erupt at each other. And do they ever have difficulty admitting mistakes! They flee and hide themselves from God among the trees. Our first parents definitely have control issues.

Psychologists remind us of a "strength-weakness paradox."² Any trait that's one of our best strengths can turn into a liability or a weakness if over-deployed. For instance, being well-organized and getting things done can be great, but overdo it and we start acting controlling. Some of us try to control our environments, others try to control the people around us, and some of us try to do both.

Our human struggle for control goes back to our roots—literally, the word Genesis means root, origin, beginning. From earliest days, we humans have told stories to try to explain ourselves, to understand the relationship between our freedom and our desire to be in control.

Adam and Eve are placed in a world they didn't create or shape. They are told to follow an arbitrary rule, one they didn't have a hand in choosing.

In 1950, a man named Theodor Geisel, commonly known as Dr. Seuss, wrote a book called *If I Ran the Zoo*. In it, a young boy tells how he'd like to remake the zoo:

"It's a pretty good zoo," said young Gerald McGrew,
"And the fellow who runs it seems proud of it, too."

"But if I ran the zoo," said young Gerald McGrew,
"I'd make a few changes, that's just what I'd do."³

Like young Gerald, like Adam and Eve, we are re-makers. Like them, we test boundaries, bite fruit, seek wisdom, exercise control. Control is one of our most esteemed cultural values. It is good to exert control over

² Ibid.

³ Dr. Seuss, *If I Ran the Zoo* (Random House, 1950).

our health, our career, and our finances. On a practical level, we do our best to manage our lives and the lives of our families. And it works ... until it doesn't.

This week the deaths in Parkland, Florida are tragic reminders that we control so little, that we can't protect those we love. A teenager with a semiautomatic rifle wrenched control from students, teachers, parents, friends, and first responders.

The shootings took place on Ash Wednesday, the very day the Christian church entered Lent, this time of repentance, of turning. This Lent, what does it mean for us as Christians to repent and turn in the face of ongoing school shootings? What does it mean for us as a society, we who are used to exerting control over so much? What does it mean for us to continue to grieve premature deaths of our young and yet not respond with action to remake our world? How long, O Lord, how long?

We do our best to manage our lives and to beat back our fears. It works, until it doesn't. Our bodies, our souls, and especially our failures, teach us this. Things happen. The truth is, knowing we are not ultimately in control situates us correctly in the universe. This awareness initially feels awful, like a further loss of control. But this is Lent; this is the journey of Jesus.

We've been given 40 days to experiment, to live as freer people who aren't as focused on controlling others or our environment. Lent invites us to practice giving up some control, to note how things go when we relax our grip. Relationships flourish with cooperation, not control. Sharing control means acknowledging that others bring gifts. For me in the passenger seat, that may mean deep breathing!

When we try to control other people and situations we miss opportunities in life. Wisdom most often comes from more than one voice and mind. Control can only get us so far.

In the first Garden, God decides to give up some control, out of love for creation. Much later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus releases his control, "Not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). This Lent, consider giving up some control out of love for God. For God has given up something so much greater for us. Amen.