

Under Control
John 14:1 – 14; 1 Peter 2:2 – 10
Sunday, May 10, 2020

So this was going to be an easy week. I was going to preach a sermon that I preached a few years ago on these same scripture readings. That was going to free up time to get some other things done that I have needed to do. I was on top of this week. I had it under control. But then around Wednesday, I started getting this feeling like that wasn't the word that God was speaking to us *now*. I started feeling like there was *another* sermon I was supposed to preach this week. Now, the *problem* with that is that I have to record the sermon and get it to Ridgley by Thursday afternoon, so that we have enough time to get the video all put together and edited. And this was *Wednesday*. So I basically had *one night* to figure out what God was saying in this and try to get some semblance of it written out.

I thought I had all of this under control. But it turns out God was calling me down a different path. So I had to put my plans and my sense of control aside, trust God, and follow that path. And the funny thing is, that process that I went through embodies the word that I think God is speaking to *all of us* right now. Because I've been noticing something lately. Jen and I first saw this in our kids. Over the past couple of weeks, we had been seeing some behavioral issues in our kids. Attitude, talking back, fighting, very big, strong emotions. And it might not sound like anything out of the ordinary for kids, but this seemed different.

At first we couldn't quite put our finger on what it was, on where this was coming from. But the more we started talking and listening to the kids, the more we started to see that they had lost any sense of *control* over their lives. They couldn't go anywhere. They couldn't do what they

wanted to do. They couldn't see their friends. The little league season was cancelled, so they couldn't do *that*.

Mom and dad are making us go for walks or bike rides every evening, but I don't *want* to do that; I want to stay home and video chat with my friends and play video games with them online, but mom and dad won't *let* me do that because we have to go for a walk, so I'm going to go on the most miserable walk that any human being has ever gone on in the history of the world!

Mom and dad just spent an hour making *this* for dinner tonight. Well, you know what? I don't *want* to eat that for dinner. I want to eat cereal.

My teacher is making me do this creative writing assignment, but I don't *want* to do that, so I am going to put forth the least amount of creative effort possible on an eight-sentence essay. I'm going to give you *one sentence*. That's what I've got. Turn it in. And by the way, I really don't feel like doing school at all today, so we're going to have a little meltdown right now.

They had lost any sense of control over their lives, so they started trying to exert control wherever they could. I think that's something that we can *all* relate to. Over the past two months, we have *all* lost a certain amount of *control* over our lives. And so we try to *exert* control wherever we can. Over our routines. Over other people. Over any number of little things. I can't control what's going on in the world around me, but I can try to control *this*.

Now, in any other sermon at any other time, I would say something along the lines of, "You cannot control *anyone* or *anything* other than *yourself*." That *self* control is what we should strive for in this time. But there is even so much about *ourselves*, our own *lives*, that is beyond

our control right now. For some of us, our day-to-day routines have been upended. We can't go where we want to go, do what we want to do, see who we want to see. For some of us our *jobs* feel out of our control. I can't even go get a *haircut* right now. And we have no sense of how much longer this is going to go on. There is so much about our lives that feels out of our control right now. And maybe that's the point.

Maybe what we're being called to right now is not to *have* control or to *exert* control, but to *trust God* and to *cede* control over our lives to God as we follow this path that has been set before us. Now, that's not a message that we like to hear, because it makes us feel passive and weak. We want to have a sense that *we* are in charge of our lives, and our destinies are in our hands. But the kind of control that scripture calls us to is *self-control*, and isn't that what self-control is? A letting go of our will and desires; *not* acting on our impulse to control the world and the people and the circumstances around us, because we trust that *God* is at work in this world and in our lives. It is exchanging *our* will for *God's* will. That is the way of Christ; it's the very words that Christ prayed in the garden before his death, "Not *my* will, O Lord, but *your* will be done." I think *that* is what God is calling us to through these two scripture readings today.

When we look at the reading from John's gospel, even though we are in the season of Easter, the lectionary has taken us back to *before* Jesus is crucified and resurrected. It's like we're standing at the empty tomb, looking back at what Jesus did and said *before*, trying to figure out how we got here; trying to go back make sense out of what Jesus said and did in light of the resurrection. Like, what is it that can lead us to resurrection?

Jesus has just finished telling his disciples that he is about to *leave* them, and that where he is going, they cannot follow. Well, *why not?* Why *can't* we follow you now? And so Jesus says to

them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” Now, we talked a few weeks ago (if you remember this) about how when it says *believe*, it doesn’t just mean “in your mind.” It means something closer to *trust*. So Jesus starts off here by saying, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust God and trust me.” He goes on to say that he is going to prepare a place for the disciples, and that he will come again to take them there. So there is this sense that Jesus is going *ahead* of them, and then he will come back to *lead* them. And Jesus says to them, “You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas says, “Lord, we don’t know where you’re *going*! How can we know the *way* there?” And Jesus says, “*I* am the way.” The disciples do not know where they are going; they don’t know where all of this is taking them. But they know the *way*, the *path* that they are supposed to follow, because Jesus has shown them – in his *words* and his *actions* – Jesus *is* the way to where they are going.

One of the things that I keep hearing a lot from people is, “If we just knew *when* this was going to be over, *how long* this was all going to last, like a *date* when this virus and quarantine would *end*, that would make it easier to endure all of this.” We don’t know where all of this is going and how long it’s going to take us to get there. But regardless of *where* and *when* and *how long*, Jesus is our *way* there, even when we do not fully know the *destination*. Faith is about *trusting* where we cannot see and have no proof. It’s about letting go of our need for answers and control and following God, wherever it takes us and however long it takes us to get there.

Philip says, “Lord, show us the Father, and we’ll be satisfied.” Again it’s, “Just give us *proof*!” And Jesus says, “I have *shown* you the Father! In the *words that I speak* and the *works that I do*, I have shown you God. And if you trust me and follow me on this way, you will do those same

works.” This is what it means for *us* to follow the way of Jesus on this journey that we are on with an uncertain destination. If we trust Jesus on this way, striving to live the way that he lived, do the things that he did – love, patience, kindness, gentleness, healing, forgiveness, compassion, truth – then wherever this way takes us, we will do the works of God, and we will show God to the world. That’s what this is about. It’s not so much the *destination* as it is how we *get* there. Will we get there by forcing our way and trying to control the world around us? Or will we get there by trusting God and living in ways that show peace and love and compassion?

But what’s important to remember in all of this is that we do not have to make our own way and figure all of this out on our own. Jesus has gone ahead of us and is leading us on this way. We do not have to be in control here, because *God is*. And Peter’s letter that reminds us of this. Peter talks about how we are like newborn infants who need to be fed and nourished so that we can grow into salvation. Newborns have no control over *anything*. They are totally dependent upon their parents for everything they need. When they are hungry, they cry, and they are fed. And the more that happens, the more they come to *trust* that when they are hungry, someone is going to give them what they need. So they *grow* into *trust*.

In the same way, Peter says, “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.” That’s an important line that we often overlook. Peter doesn’t say, “Build yourselves up into a spiritual house. Do the work. Make it happen.” He says, “*Let* yourselves *be* built into a spiritual house.” We don’t do this ourselves. We don’t have control over this process. God does. And when we *trust* that, God builds us up little by little into the people that God is calling us to be.

Peter says, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous

light.” We have been called by God to proclaim God’s mighty acts *in this*. We don’t know exactly where we’re going or how long it’s going to take us to get there, but we have been called by God to proclaim God’s mighty acts *in this*. We do that by following the way that is Jesus, living in ways that show the grace and peace of God to the world.

We do not do this by exerting control over ourselves or others. We do it by giving control over our lives to God, trusting God, and allowing God to work *in* and *through* us. That’s the most important thing in all of this. It would be really easy for me to say, “Okay, here’s what you do. Show grace and peace and kindness and compassion and patience. Now go out there and do it!” That’s still putting the burden on *you*, on *us*. That’s building *ourselves* up into a spiritual house. What we trust in here is that Christ has gone ahead of us, and that Christ is leading us. And the way that Christ *does* that is through the power of the Holy Spirit. We do this, we make this journey, not by our own control or power, but by the power of the Spirit at work in us.

Lesslie Newbigin was a British missionary and theologian who talks about how the Spirit of God goes before us, summoning us to follow. All that we do as the church is not by our own initiative. It is in response to the Spirit of God. And Newbigin writes, “by obediently following where the Spirit leads, often in ways neither planned, known, or understood, the church acts out the hope that it is given by the Spirit.” We are being called to follow Christ right now in ways that we did not *plan*, in ways that we do not fully *know*, and in ways that we do not fully *understand*. But if we can trust God and follow obediently the way that is Jesus, then we will be showing the world the *hope* that we have that God is with us, guiding us, even through this.

If you are feeling a loss of *control* in your life right now, maybe that’s simply an opportunity for you to trust God, let go of the need to control, and be led by the Spirit of God. If we can

obediently follow the Spirit, wherever it takes us and however long it takes us to *get* there, then we will be following the way that is Jesus, living in ways that show God to the world – even in this.