

Letting Go of Our Illusion of Control

Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

It seems like a good thing: I want to be in control of my life- my finances, my health, and my career. By the way, I need to call the consultants who advise pastors about their pensions. How should I be investing at this stage of my ministerial career? (That's code for saying I am not a spring chicken anymore). I bought a car last year that has five safety features on it that help to keep me safe. It's the car that more and more has the control, but I'm the one who bought the car to help me control what happens on the road.

I saw my doctor for my annual a couple weeks ago, and I said that I need to lose some weight and get some exercise. He nodded in agreement. I can control that, even though it takes some discipline.

When we think about it, we spend a lot of time and energy and money to try to control life.

Sometimes I wonder if we don't try to control God. We received a letter in the mail yesterday from a Christian organization that has been on their knees praying for us, and that may be true, and I appreciate that. The letter quotes Acts 19: "Now God worked miracles by the hand of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick (and the organization put in parentheses: spiritually, physically, and financially sick) and diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them."

In the envelope was a paper "prosperity handkerchief." If I follow their instructions, I am to write the name of someone who needs an answer to prayer on the handkerchief as I place it on this chapter from Acts, and pray for seven minutes, because that's God's perfect number. Then I send it back to the organization. They will pray as well. And then I will receive the blessing.

This somehow feels to me like trying to control God. If we do certain keys things, then God will do God's part. Now I believe in the practice of prayer. But my prayers more often than not now release people into God's care. You're will be done is attached to my prayers. That to me is releasing control back into God's hands. If you're wondering, I will not be sending the prosperity handkerchief back, but I will continue to pray for people and for situations, for God's will to be done. And by the way, sometimes I will pray for longer than seven minutes, sometimes shorter.

It seems to me that we spend a lot of time and energy and money to try to control life. Richard Rohr defines suffering as “whenever we are not in control.” Let me share something from my life: If I am in a relationship with someone where there is conflict, I feel the lack of control, and I experience suffering. That particularly shines for me because I have a need for people’s approval. So if I’m not sensing their approval, I want to try to control the situation. I might try to manipulate the relationship so that I can experience the opioid drug of approval. And when I don’t get it, I suffer. But I can’t control what happens in relationships, and when I try to control them, I suffer. I am working on that, and I’m better than I used to be.

We try to control our health, don’t we? Maybe you have the healthiest diet in the world, eating kale and organic this and that, and you’re on the Peloton bike program, and that cancer still finds a way to invade a part of your body, and you are not in control. And you suffer. You might have married with the best of intentions, and the relationship ended anyway. And we discover we are not in control, and we experience suffering.

Again, Richard Rohr defines suffering as “whenever we are not in control.” And yet the suffering we try to avoid is woven into the fabric of our lives. We heard the last portion of the Joseph story from Genesis 50. Joseph is a good guy, a favorite in the family. He probably shouldn’t have told his brothers about those dreams he was having where they would eventually bow down to him. He probably should have just written about those in his journal.

But he soon discovers that his life is not in his control. You remember that his brothers kidnap him, and throw him down a dry well, and tell his father a wild critter ate him, and then they sell him to slave traders heading for Egypt. He is not in control.

He ends up sold to an Egyptian army captain, whose wife makes a play for him, but he’s a stand-up guy, and says no, and she claims rape, and he gets put in the dungeon. He’s doing the right thing, and he realizes how little he can control life. All he can do is continue to be faithful to his God.

He ends up interpreting some dreams while in prison, and the pharaoh finds out, and asks him to interpret a dream, and he is rewarded by being made vice-pharaoh, and secretary of agriculture, where he saves the Egyptians through a famine. His brothers from Israel come down looking for food; they don’t recognize him because of the haircut, and he plays with them, and eventually he lets them know who he is.

Now they are terrified, thinking he will kill them. Joseph does now have control of the situation, doesn't he? But maybe because he realizes that God has been moving in all of these circumstances when he did not have control, now that he has power, he says, I'm going to use it mercifully. He tells his brothers, What you meant for harm, God meant for good. As Joseph experienced the lack of control, God was taking all circumstances and using them for good.

Paul, of the healing handkerchief, experienced much suffering in his life. We see it detailed in the second lesson today/tonight. He suffered afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger. God did not spare him from those things. I heard a quote from James Finley the other day that I am still ruminating on: God does not protect us from anything, but God preserves us through all things.

Paul at one point prays three extended periods that God would remove the thorn in his flesh, but God says, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Paul was not in control of that thorn in the flesh, whatever it was, but that suffering allowed him to place his life in God's hands, and allowed for God to work through it.

I read the story Jesus tells about the banquet, where people are jostling for position at the best tables, in other words, they are trying to control how much honor they will receive. They are trying to control how people will think about them. Jesus says, Give it up. Let that be somebody else's job. Give up control of what people think about you. Just be yourself, the way God created you, and leave the results up to God. You are not in control. And there is tremendous freedom in that.

Ironically it is the suffering that teaches us how to live beyond the illusion that we are in control. And as we work the spiritual disciplines, we practice giving control to God. What does Jesus say in the Garden of Gethsemane? Father, let this cup pass from me. That's my desire. I don't want to do this. But your will be done. Jesus acknowledges that he is not in control. There are bigger purposes at hand. By the way, Jesus prays three times in the garden, and every time he comes closer to what God wants. As he prays, he is not getting God to come over to his side, he is realizing that God has a bigger purpose. God will use the cross for the salvation of the world.

Someone told me about Welcoming Prayer the other day, and in closing I will share this with you. There are three steps. As you take a time to be silent and to become aware of God's presence within you, sink into what you are feeling at this

moment. What is your body feeling? What are you experiencing? What are the thoughts that come to mind that invite emotions to take place?

The second step is to welcome those thoughts and feelings, as you acknowledge them. So instead of trying to change what is within you, just welcome whatever is happening in you.

And thirdly, let go. Let go of your desire for security, let go of your desire for approval, let go of your need to control, place it in God's hands. The phrase I use is, Into your hands. And in the process, we give up the illusion of control and we place it in God's hands.

It seems to me that this is truly a faith stance, that I am acknowledging that I don't control things. All I can do is show up, and be who God created me to be, and plant seeds, and let go of the outcome. God does the work. This faith stance acknowledges that we have a heavenly Father/Mother who deeply loves and cares about us.

I conclude with a quote from Father Richard Rohr: "We are clearly not in control. Our bodies, our souls, and especially our failures, teach us this as we get older. This is not a negative discovery, but a thrilling discovery of divine providence; being led, used, and guided; having an inner purpose and a sense of personal vocation; and owning one's destiny as a gift from God. Learning that you are not in control situates you correctly in the universe. You know you are being guided, and your reliance on that guidance is precisely what allows your journey to happen. What freedom and peace this can bring!"

I pray that freedom and peace for you and me, as we daily and hourly and moment by moment give up the illusion that we are in control. And I pray that we would continually let go into the hands of God who loves us so. Amen.