

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we are all too human, but we are thankful. This month draws us into our hope to be people of thankfulness, but sometimes, all we see are the barriers, the preventions, the small troubles that draw us away from ourselves and you. Walk with us to get beyond the clutter, gracious God, to get beyond all those things that pull us away from true thankfulness. We lift up to you all those things we have named here and those things we name in our hearts and entrust them to your care. Walk with us in pain and in joy.

We want to be faithful, but we also want to have everything exactly the way we want it, and we know, God, that these two things do not really mix. We all too often do not give you much credit, gracious God. We say, "here God, take care of this," and then we hold onto it. Sometimes you move us to act; sometimes you move us to be still and know that you are God. Give us the ears to hear and the eyes to see how you would have us move in each moment. Lead us to faithful perspective, that we may know what we can control and to know what we cannot, to consider well how we can be active and when to leave things alone, bodily and mentally. These are difficult tasks, holy one, as we always want to be doing, always want to be fixing. But you are God; we are not. These are harder tasks in doing than they are in knowing and understanding, but work with us to make them reality. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, who holds us all in the best and worst of times, as he taught us to pray together...

SERMON

When I was growing up, I watched a '60s show called *Get Smart*; I hope many of you remember it. It was a spoof on the growing spy culture like James Bond. It tells the story of good guy Maxwell Smart, who, well, isn't all that smart. He works for the secret

government spy organization called “Control,” who battles the evil organization bent on world conquest called “Kaos.” When I was young, you don’t know the art of parody really well; you have to know the original to get the joke. For a long time, I thought that “chaos” was spelled “Kaos” because of those bad guys. However, it taught me at an unconscious level that control is good and chaos is bad. That may not always be true. Life is more accurately placed on a spectrum of chaos and control, but maybe there is much more to those two ideas than we are first led to believe. Maybe control isn’t always the most wonderful and possible thing, although it seems to be the most comfortable and most good.

We continue our discussion of thankfulness by talking about a second roadblock to a thankful life. We are so afraid of the future. Why is that? The future is unknown, and we rely upon the world to give us the thankfulness we seek. It can easily become that my ability to be thankful depends on the conditions outside of me. I can only be thankful when I know what’s going on and what will happen and I can direct it. I can only be thankful when all is going according to plan and the world is doing what I want it to do. But it doesn’t always work that way. And, of course, we feel like we must be in charge of anything in order to think about it positively. We must be in control.

We like control. Control seems to be a good thing because we can know and understand everything that we control. What we control cannot hurt us or go against what we want. That’s all nice and happy, but I’m gonna share a little secret. We aren’t really in control of...well, just about everything. We have our little corners of the world where we can control our décor, what we get at the grocery store, who we talk to and share our time with, but, in the grand scheme of things, each of us has a small radius of control in a very big world. Those things really mean nothing when we see them in comparison with this

world that is difficult and beautiful at the same time. But we want that control. When we really get down to it, control is almost an addiction that has no satisfactory conclusion. We don't really have it; we can't get it, but we keep striving for it. It's a ghost, chasing after the wind. It's not something for the Christian life. Let's look at the problem of control through these two scripture passages. The first passage is from Job, which speaks of humanity's control (or lack thereof). The second is from Luke and explains a bad and good response to our lack of control. We'll then look for some solace from this horrible addiction.

Have you ever tried to read Job straight through? It's complicated; it's far from straightforward. It doesn't have a clean narrative like a book we'd read today. In fact, it's wrapped up in poetic arguments between Job and the so-called friends that sit with him in the midst of his grief and trouble. They talk about God and the world and why it all doesn't make sense. The main thrust of the book is why bad things happen to good people in a world governed by a good God, which is probably one of the oldest questions in the book for people of faith. There is no good answer. It all leads to the ending of the book, an encounter with God in the whirlwind. The ending of Job is really strange, and our first scripture lesson touches upon a few of the things that God spoke to Job and his quarreling companions. It's a long line of questions and wonderings that, well, have no answer, or, at least, no good answer. The bottom line is control. Do we have it? No, we do not. God questions them about all of nature and the world, and oh so poetically. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?...Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? ¶Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? ¶Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this." I can imagine everyone just standing there and saying,

“Uhhh...nope. Sorry.” There’re just no good answers; God’s creation is complicated and confusing, but we are obviously not in control of how it moves and works.

Just like the characters in Job, we find ourselves answering the same questions and having no real good answer. We cannot control hurricanes, the stock market, or how the weather will be each and every day. Methodist pastors have to learn this in a special way, as we often have no control over our appointments. We can only control so much, but we are far from humble and unwilling to relinquish control. We’re always chasing things beyond our control or preoccupying ourselves with things outside our power. So, we make up that we have control. I get a kick out of those commercials on TV that show fans trying to control their football team’s performance just by their little actions and superstitions. For instance, one commercial shows the story of a Broncos fan that seems to figure out that every time the Broncos score, he is downstairs getting food or drinks for his friends. So, he decides he’ll take one for the team by staying downstairs so the Broncos can win this one. I’ve felt tempted help the Bears in bad situations, and then I think about it in the grand scheme of things. I’m sure that by, you know, me changing a jersey or being in the right place at the right time will change the course of a game played by professional athletes. These athletes spend hours, days, weeks working on very precise techniques, teamwork, and timing to move forward in their very technical game plan against a professional opponent that does the same thing every week. It’s obvious that my actions will switch the balance. Yeah, I’m sure that’ll work, since I’m so integral to the Chicago Bears. Yeah, that was sarcasm. It’s more of a foolish attempt to exert some control in a situation where that’s not possible. How do we try to exert control in more subtle ways when it’s impossible?

We cannot control so much in our lives, much to our dismay. We recognize that, but probably not in the best way. Lack of control this day in age does not amount to peace. We do not rest and trust that all will attend to itself. I thought our second scripture was worth a visit again this week. We'll focus on his first topic: worry. Lack of control manifests itself into worry and anxiety, and we can't control them either! Not only does worry preoccupy our minds, it also preoccupies our bodies. So, I looked up what worry does to us.

According to WebMD, ongoing worry has physiological responses of increased heart rate, dizziness, irritability, inability to concentrate, nervous energy, headache, and many more. Over time, the body gets sick easier, and ongoing worry could lead to heart disease and heart attack. This is not wellness and trust. Although we may lie to ourselves or try to push it all down, our bodies are always honest with us and act with what we put on them.

Control is a problem of focusing on the wrong things, and worry is a manifestation of that problem. We often worry about the little things, so much so that we actually create the physical and mental problems. But Jesus brings us back to the real picture. Jesus tells us that we are remembered and cared for. We do not always get what we desire, but we will often realize we have what we need. "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!" The point isn't that we are superior, but that God cares for all God's creation. If God cares for the ravens, who can win the Super Bowl, God will care for us too. Worrying tries to short circuit things by putting back into our hands what does not belong there, as we often worry about things that are not in our power. We are chasing the things that really don't matter. When we heed and really seek to live into Jesus' words, we find that worry gets us nowhere, and we see something more important about the world.

The answer is not that we will always be comfortable. The answer is not that we have no concerns. We do not get everything we pray for; we are not always carefree and without burden. All of those are too simplistic for this world we live in. Few get what they deserve or desire. The rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous. Instead, the answer is that God is watching over us, and we will never be alone. So, how do we live? It's hard; believe me. We all suffer from control and worry. But there's a helpful prayer called the Serenity Prayer, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, that may have become cliché but nevertheless has great wisdom. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." The bottom line here is perspective. Like we talked about last week, we need perspective. Jesus calls this striving for the Kingdom of God instead. When we put ourselves in the grand perspective of things, we can see where God calls us to be active agents and where there are things we just need to leave up to God. When we talk about control, it's often about us. We have this human need to have things be exactly so, and when they aren't we are cranky. But that's not the way of God. When we're tuned into God and looking at the world with good perspective that understands who we are and who we are called to be, all these things just fall into line. We will know what we can do, what we can't do, what we can work on, and we can let go of the rest. Worry will not be our guide but God will be. Much easier said than done, but that's where life abundant and thankfulness begin.

Control and worry are empty, more treasures we find are really bankrupt. We cannot control so much in this world. Lack of control manifests itself as worry and anxiety, which only bring burden and pain on our bodies. The world is a confusing place, and we will not have it all right all the time, but the crises we fear are usually imagined, not reality.

Throughout it all, God calls to us with perspective; God is with us and God cares for us, amidst the trouble and the problems we make for ourselves. Next week, we will find the one component of life that gives the greatest boon to thankfulness and can draw us away from roadblocks. When we plant it and foster this focus, we weather many storms, not unscathed but rooted. Thanks be to God for God's abundant guidance and love, even while we are so human and try to control things we can't. Amen and Amen.