

The Biggest Loser Matthew 3:13-4:11

We live in a country of over-indulgence and at some level we feel we deserve it. In any given day an average American will use 7 times more of the world's resources than is our fair share. And yet we do it over and over again because we feel it is our God given right.

The Biggest Loser is the program that best puts on display the physical effects of that over-indulgence. Lives at risk...lives out of control...people in the grip of fear...that is the premise of this show which is bringing this ugly secret to our televisions every week. America is consuming itself to the brink of death!

If you watch this show most people didn't choose this path, somehow it takes over their life as food becomes a replacement for something they are missing. Maybe it is a broken relationship, maybe it is lost love, maybe it's a tendency towards addictive behavior: whatever it is they have lost control, in a bad way, and are fighting for their lives.

So how does this work today when I am using a show about taking back control, when I am going to offer up thoughts on why we need to give control up? Let me start with this point, losing control and giving control up are two very different things. In the Biggest Loser these people have lost control of their lives. In our scripture today Jesus is giving up control so that God can live through him.

I would even go as far to say that some of the people on Biggest Loser who have lost control only find themselves by giving up control to their trainers. Once they stop fighting the people that are there to help them get healthy, then their lives start to gain ground.

The Bible is full of people who had control, lost control, and then gave up control. I know I referenced Paul last week, but what a great example for the way many people come to know Christ. Paul was an orthodox Jew, a well versed in the legalistic and religious traditions of the Pharisaic sect. He probably had a classical Hellenistic education which showed in his speaking and writing abilities. And even though we don't know why he singled out the Christians as the object of his scorn, we do know that he was a leading antagonist of this early movement. Paul was pretty much in control of his destiny and had found a niche in this Jewish attack on Christianity.

Of course we know that as his story progresses he experiences God in a powerful encounter on the road to Damascus that leaves him blind. In this moment in time he loses control of his life as he is not only physically blind, but also loses his direction, his purpose, in his life to this point.

When he gives up control and accepts his role as an evangelist for Christ his sight and his life regain focus. It is only in giving up control, letting go to God, that Paul ultimately finds his purpose.

Letting go, Episcopal priest and author Martin Smith says addressing the issue of giving up something at Lent, "...will bring [us] much closer to the experience of Jesus than the word 'discipline' which so many of us have been trained to invoke at the beginning of Lent...the belt-tightening resolutions about giving up this or taking on that. What we are called to give up in Lent is control itself!"

It's a rather daunting aspiration, letting go of control. But if we look closely at this morning's Gospel, we just might learn how. It's the multi-layered story of Jesus in the wilderness--- a story about temptation, idolatry, and most definitely, control.

This Jesus-in-the-wilderness story follows immediately following his baptism by John in the Jordan. Smith reminds us that Jesus had absolutely no need of the baptism John had been offering. After all, Jesus was without sin, and John had been offering a baptism specifically for the forgiveness of sin.

Yet when Jesus saw the masses of ordinary people wading into the river Jordan to receive John's baptism, Jesus chose to plunge right in there with them. Says Smith: "He threw away his innocence and separateness, to take on the identity of the struggling men and women who were reaching out en masse for the lifeline of forgiveness...It was at that moment ... that 'the heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."

What an empowering moment it must have been for Jesus to know he'd made the right choice by plunging into that river, to hear that he was God's beloved Son and to know that God was pleased with him for choosing to stand in solidarity with all humankind!

As we continue into the second half of today's reading, we see that the same life-giving Spirit that had descended on Jesus in the Jordan delivers him to a desert of temptation. Isn't that interesting, that right after Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit, he's forced into forty days facing desire, temptation, and spiritual struggle? It almost makes us want to say, "Welcome to our world!" We know all about desire, temptation and spiritual struggle!

But it's as if having been assured of his divine identity as God's Son, Jesus needs to fully experience his identity as one of us by facing temptation. And he needs to face the same temptation that he alone will face again and again all the way to the cross—the temptation to protect himself from human vulnerability by misusing his divine power for himself.

Let me say here, that contrary to the images this story may conjure up for us of Jesus doing battle with a pitchfork-wielding creature with red skin and horns, we are not to take this story too literally, though neither are we to deny the existence of evil. As Anglican theologian and Bishop N.T. Wright explains, this story, "does not envisage Jesus engaged in conversation with a visible figure to whom he could talk as one to another. The devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his own head," Wright says, and, "They are plausible, attractive, and make, as we would say, a lot of sense."

To any one of those ideas, Jesus might well have thought to himself, "Well, why not? After all, I'm the Son of God." But Jesus recognizes each of the temptations he faces as temptations that you and I face all the time—temptations to put other things, lots of other things--before God.

They're all temptations to call other things "Lord" by letting them control us, or our decision-making. They're temptations, in other words, to worship false idols. If Jesus doesn't face these temptations, or if he gives in to using his divine power, he can't possibly know what it means to be one of us. He must face his temptations in the fullness of his humanity.

Jesus meets the idols of comfort and security by facing the temptation to turn stones into bread to meet his hunger—but Jesus

knows we have to live relying not on the idols of comfort and security, but on God's word. He meets the idols of power and wealth by facing the temptation to rule the kingdoms of the world—but Jesus knows we are separated, rather than united by these idols of power and wealth. Finally, Jesus meets the idols of pride and prestige by facing the temptation to prove himself and his importance as God's son—but Jesus knows that for us these idols of pride and power are just masks for our fear and vulnerability.

So Jesus stands firm, letting go of the temptation to turn away from the pain and challenge of humanity, letting go of the temptation to make idols of comfort and security, of power and wealth, of pride and prestige. Jesus stands firm in his solidarity as one of us. (And remember he was tempted for forty days and these were just the last three of heaven only knows how many temptations!)

But throughout his struggle in the desert, the over-arching temptation Jesus faced was the most fundamental and most powerful temptation faced by humankind, and that is indeed the temptation to be in control. Jesus certainly could have been, easily enough. Instead, what Jesus gives up is control!

In the midst of his desert experience, rather than listening to the voice of the great deceiver, Jesus remembers his own story and God's part in it. He remembers the voice of God that says, "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased." He remembers the words from Hebrew scripture—the same words paraphrased by Paul in his letter to the Romans—that, "the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

So Jesus observes it. Jesus refuses to worship at the altar of control...refuses to make his needs and desires the Lord of his life...refuses to grit his teeth and assert his will in an attempt to be in control. No, to the contrary: Jesus lets go! In response to the voice of the great deceiver, Jesus doesn't resist temptation he lets go of it. Jesus remembers the voice of God that calls him "Beloved," he remembers the voice of scripture that feeds his soul, and Jesus—in all of his humanity--is free.

Writing for the social-justice group Sojourners, Michaela Bruzzese says that, "When we...accept the invitation to discipleship, we must

identify and defeat the false gods we have accumulated.” Wouldn’t that be a wonderful daily practice—to identify the false Gods we have created? Who or what are our false Gods? Who, or what, do we call “Lord” by virtue of allowing it to control us or our decision-making? Who, or what, do we make more important than our relationship with God in Christ? Whatever it is, no matter how fine, no matter how virtuous, it is still idolatrous—especially when it means giving our need to be in control priority over our need for God-- when let’s face it, God can do a far better job of directing our lives than we could ever do-- if we just let him!

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" writes Paul, "because if you concede with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from death, you will be saved and made whole."

Imagine choosing Jesus as Lord, rather than comfort or security, power or wealth, pride or prestige. Imagine choosing Jesus as Lord, rather than the need to be in control. Imagine choosing Jesus as Lord and then letting go.

You know historically, the phrase "Jesus is Lord," was the earliest Christian confession. If you want to believe that Jesus is Lord and make it a reality that’s reflected in your life, you have to intentionally choose to do so every day.

In the Biggest Loser people are seeking to regain value in their lives. When we are ready to give up, to lose control, it is only then that we can find our purpose in living as followers of the one who gave up everything.