

## BEING IN CONTROL OR BEING VULNERABLE

Matthew 5: 1-12; Micah 6: 6-8

It was happening again... the abuse and the trauma. He was reliving it in his dream, his nightmare. He felt all the fear, the smell of it, the sweating... He couldn't breathe... He was going to die... And then, the next thing he knew, he was awake, in the arms of his wife... Dennis had had one of his bad dreams again... They had stopped for a while, but now that he was a father, with a child of his own, just a few months old, the dreams had started again.

Dennis grew up in a home where he was abused. He didn't remember exactly when it all started, but he remembered the feeling of it, from the touching, to much more. He had been to therapy about it. His wife was very supportive. He had got it under control over many years. But now, being a father, it had started again. It was beyond his control again. How was he going to be a good father without having to be tormented by his own childhood? How could he make sure none of the trauma in him would influence his own son and his own parenting in a negative way?

Sadly, the statistics on childhood abuse are startling. In fact, recent investigations have uncovered what's been suspected for a while now: child abuse networks are alive and well in Canada and around the world. And the greatest shock of all is that the abuse begins with someone the child knows well, someone the child trusts.

Now, trauma itself is not limited to abuse, be it from family members, coaches, teachers, clergy or anyone else. No. One of the prevalent forms of trauma in the news over the last few years is PTSD (Post-Traumatic-Stress-disorder) – something soldiers and police officers experience. PTSD is also something many are suffering who work in emergency crisis type situations, or even people who have witnessed terrible things. Like many traumas, PTSD is about images, memories and feelings that are not only terrible; but they keep coming up in the victim's dreams and thoughts as if they are happening now. All the feelings and sensations of what happened then are being relived and replayed again as if they are happening now. Is it any surprise that many choose to take their own lives rather than go on and on with the horrible experiences?

Now whether its trauma or so many other things that happen in life that aren't positive, wouldn't life be so much easier if we could have greater control? From our mental health to our physical health, our financial situation, our job situation, how others treat us and how

much they control or influence our lives; life would be so much easier with more control. From the weather and larger natural forces, to the climate and the soil, the water and so much else that affects our lives, being in control over it so we can enjoy it without being threatened by it would make life so much easier. From our inner feelings, to our relationships with others and how others treat us; being in control would make life so much easier.

But you know, being in control is a slippery slope. When does having some control just to have some peace of mind and stability in life begin to become control because of fear, suspicion or paranoia? When does having some control for our safety and security become control that imposes itself on others and blocks us from having more genuine relationships with others where they are free to agree or disagree, go our way or another way? When is having more control a block to greater intimacy and openness with others because we are afraid to risk being betrayed or taken advantage of? Is the only solution to life getting more and more control? Or is there a better way that actually engages our fears in more life-giving ways?

This, my friends, is what our gospel reading is all about. Our gospel reading is the first part of the most important piece of teaching out of Jesus mouth. Our gospel reading is known as: "The Beatitudes." A beatitude is like a blessing. To be blessed is to be fortunate or happy because you have discovered real treasure. To be blessed is to be fortunate or happy because you have been opened to the greatest gifts life has to offer. In the face of a world and a life where we are always looking for greater and greater control in order to be safe, fulfilled and happy, this teaching of Jesus promises to offer us an even better way. So, what is the better way to true blessedness?

The masses of people Jesus was teaching were not the small minority of wealthy in Israelite society. They were the majority poor. The masses of people Jesus was teaching did not feel particularly safe, secure, comfortable or in control. They were vulnerable, desperate, hungry for a better life and a better world. Some were angry. Some were in despair. Any faith and hope in them was beaten down. Love in them had little chance to grow when the soil in their hearts was so dry or hardened. The only hope they knew was getting more control in their lives. Either the wealthy and powerful were going to let control trickle down a bit so the masses could get some, or else, the masses would take it by force. How else could they find some blessedness, fulfillment and peace? Either we're in control or out of control.

But Jesus offers them another way, a better way. And so, "Jesus began to speak, and taught them saying: Blessed..." It is not those in control who are blessed. They may feel safe and secure for the time being – as long as their money, their health, their relationships, and any number of unforeseen things that can happen on any given day, stay stable. Those in control

now may feel safe and secure now – so long as they hold on to their power and they can negotiate with others, defeat their enemies, keep on top of change and master every situation. But how long can anyone be in control? Isn't change and decay a part of life for anyone from king and queen to those living on the street?

And so, true blessedness, true fulfillment, true peace cannot ultimately be achieved by having greater and greater control in life. No. True blessedness, true fulfillment and true peace can only come if we find a life-giving way to engage our human vulnerability. Rather than control it, deny it or try to escape or overcome it, why not dance with our human vulnerability. To dance means we find creative ways to grow in the midst of change and decay. We find creative ways to learn and find meaning which leads to blessedness even though we will go through difficult things.

And so, Jesus teaches, blessed are not those who think they have it all figured out, those who think they are spiritually complete, who have it made... no! Blessed, rather, are those who are poor in spirit, humble and open to take in and learn new things, who know they don't have it all figured out, who recognize the vulnerability, impermanence and variability of life. They are equipped to live within the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is a space where people are open to each other and care for each other, because they know they need each other.

And blessed are those who mourn. They know the pain of life and they know that in order to be comforted they have to open themselves to others and to community. They have to face their vulnerability and be open to the gift of love. They need to name their pain and trauma and share it with others, not close it in and pretend they're in control.

And blessed are the meek, who know that the earth is to be shared not greedily taken for themselves; that we are all guests here and must live with each other cooperatively because we are all vulnerable and need each other. The meek deserve to inherit the earth because they will share it and make space for others, not close their borders and build walls.

And blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness or justice (same word), justice not just for me and mine, but justice for all people, even strangers. Living in communion with God and being filled by God can only come if justice is not self-serving but a blessing for others as much as for ourselves. We have to let go control and make room for the pain of others. We have to be open to the humanity of others, even our enemies, even criminals, without endangering the safety and support of the victims.

And blessed are the merciful, for they know how necessary it is to receive mercy and understanding themselves. They show mercy because they know how vulnerable they are in their need for mercy.

And blessed are the pure in heart, those who are free enough to be vulnerable in their hearts rather than having to be in control; free enough to be honest and sincere rather than full of pretence, façade and deceitfulness because they want to hide their feelings since it makes them vulnerable.

And blessed are the peacemakers, who also have to forgive to make peace; who know that warring on enemies and crushing them can never win peace, and that hate and unresolved conflict cannot bring peace. Only the vulnerability of seeking peace with others rather than controlling others can win.

And finally, blessed are those who not only seek justice for all, but are ready to suffer for it, choosing to suffer rather than inflict harm, choosing to be mistreated for the right reasons rather than harming others in order to win and enforce their cause.

Jesus was trying to open up an alternative way than more power and control as the way to a better, more fulfilled life, a life that is a true blessing for others and oneself. To find ways to deal with problems by sharing our vulnerability is never going to be easy. Many times, we can be taken advantage of by those who want control and power over us. How we will protect ourselves without shutting down our vulnerable openness to others is a challenge. How we will heal our wounds without shutting down to others is a challenge. But getting obsessed with greater and greater control is not the answer. It always makes things worse even if in the moment it feels satisfying to be in control.

Jesus was preaching to those who had little control of so much in their lives - the poor and disenfranchised of his world. Sadly, many didn't listen to Jesus in the end. Many bought into the law and order agenda fuelled by hate and violence. It was us against them. The leaders got the people energized with bitterness. They got them using their propaganda, threats and alternative facts to get an innocent man crucified. Everyone suffered for it in the end because eventually the Romans legions came in using a superior force against force, destroying Jerusalem, the temple and massacring thousands.

The questions for us and for all those who are moved by Jesus words are these: Will we choose the way of control or the way of vulnerable openness? Will we risk the suffering that comes from being open even when there's a chance we will be taken advantage of, or will we build bigger walls around us so that we will never be hurt or undermined? For those who

suffer trauma of any kind, the answer can never be control. Faith, hope and love can never grow unless the heart is opened, tears are shed and others are let in. Jesus is calling us to follow him, to create circles around us where God rules and Christ is the head, circles of vulnerable love, circles of mercy and grace, peacemaking, mourning, openness of spirit, meekness of soul, purity of heart, a passion for justice without giving in to hate in the face of opposition.

Will you participate in God's kingdom circle of vulnerable openness and resilient love? Will you follow Jesus in all the particular challenges, opportunities and relationships of your life at this time? Amen.