

“Control Issues”

Ruth 1:1-18

Okay, control issues. Anybody here know anyone with control issues? Anybody here have control issues? They're a little easier to identify in others.

We all have control issues. Why? Probably because in reality there is very little control in life. We come into the world virtually powerless. (I say virtually powerless because those baby lungs are quite powerful). Maisie, my 9 month old, is walking with the help of a walker. She absolutely loves it. But all she can do is walk straight until she hits a wall or some other obstacle and then she's stuck. While she's walking she is all smiles. As soon as she hits the wall she lets out a shriek until someone comes running and turns her around. She may not be able to do a whole lot, but she has certainly learned how to exert influence and control her environment. Most of us will leave this earth pretty powerless too. In between those days of walking with a walker and walking with a walker, we have a little more autonomy and control in life, but only a little. For the most part, control is an illusion.

At the Ruth Graham conference, one of the presenters was Steve Weiss, a psychologist and pastor in Minnesota. Steve did a workshop on the “Illusions of Control”. He pointed out that when it comes to control, there are three areas of our life. The **first** has the things we have *control* over. The **second** has the things we have *influence* over and the **third** involves things we have *no control or influence* over. In the first category, the things we have control over, pretty much the only thing is ourselves. There are some exceptions, but in general we have control over what we eat and the amount we exercise, how we react to situations, how we treat our family members and on and on. Just about the only thing in life that you actually have control over is yourself. Ironically it's usually ourselves that we have the hardest time controlling. So as a result, often when we don't have self control, we try to control what we don't have control over.

People other than ourselves fall into the second category of those things we have *influence but no control over*. This is true of your significant other, this is true of your children, no matter how old they are, and this is true of your co-workers, friends, and extended family. Obviously there are varying degrees of influence. I have a tiny amount of influence on a child I sponsor through World Vision, but I have an enormous amount of influence over my young children. Nevertheless it is important to recognize that while you may love others incredibly, you do not have control over them. It is so easy to forget, but we cannot change or control others. You can influence people, you can encourage and motivate, you can demoralize and put down but you cannot control others and you should not try to. The funny thing is that I believe **we have more influence when we realize we don't have control**.

Don't forget that you are called to be influential in many areas where it feels there is next to no control. Exercising your right to vote, helping with the Sunday School or volunteering for a local organization or financially supporting an international one are all important ways we influence our community and our world. **Don't overestimate your control and don't underestimate your influence**. You can and you are called to make a difference in this world.

In the third area are the situations we have absolutely no control or influence over. The weather falls into that category and so do a huge number of other things in life, like the fact that Tim Horton's won't take my debit card, I can't take knitting needles onto a plane or that someone I love could be taken from me in the blink of an eye.

Why do we try so hard to control so much? Hidden behind the curtain of control is fear. If you know someone who really is a 'control freak' or a major perfectionist, understand that you are dealing with someone who has a lot of fear and insecurity. Try to recognize and acknowledge in yourself your fear and anxiety when you are trying to control things and people. And understand that no matter how hard you strive for perfection regarding the people around you, your workplace, and your home, and no matter how hard you work at having them run the way you want them to, such efforts will never truly calm your fear or your anxiety. Life is uncertain and bad things can happen.

I know only one way to calm that fear. That is through a relationship with God through Jesus. Only Jesus can calm the storm and guide us through the night.

I chose the story of Ruth because it is a beautiful illustration of a life of faith. I encourage you to read the whole story. It's not long, only four chapters. If you don't have a readable Bible at home, come and read the story sometime here in the sanctuary or in the library. Naomi is an Israelite and folks; Naomi is the female version of Job. First she experienced famine, and so along with her family she had to move to and live in a foreign land called Moab. Then her husband dies and leaves her a widow, and then both of her adult sons die. It is difficult to imagine a worse fate for a woman at that time. There is no one left to provide for her. But God has not forgotten her.

The story is just as much about Naomi as it is about Ruth. But the book is not named 'Naomi' or even 'Naomi and Ruth' because Ruth is the one with the greatest faith. Ruth was a Moabite woman who had married one of Naomi's sons. Despite the fact that she is not an Israelite, she has a love and a faith that surpasses almost any you could find in Israel. When Naomi urges her daughter-in-law to return to her father's house where she can be provided for, Ruth answers:

*'Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!'*

I don't know what soul searching Ruth went through to make this decision. I have no doubt that she was afraid, but instead of clinging to her fear she reached out in faith and in love to God and to her mother-in-law. Being hurt and vulnerable after being widowed at such a young age, she could have surrounded herself in fear and made some resolutions to gain control in response to an event she had no control over. She could have played into the illusion of control and vowed that she would do things better so that the bad things wouldn't happen again. But instead of trying to control more, she surrendered her life to God. She put her trust in a God she barely knew. She responded in love.

We try so hard to write our own life story. We hold firmly the pen and we won't let it go. When things change or happen that hurt us, maybe a parent or spouse dying or a breakup of a relationship, we try harder to hold the pen and to write our life better. Sometimes when that doesn't work so well we try to write another person's life. As we already know, it doesn't work, so we get angry and try harder.

Friends, God wants to be the author of your life. You know your life story will be so much better written if you put your pen down, if you surrender and let God write your story. That's what Ruth did. She had no guarantees, only faith and trust that God is good and that God would provide. And God did provide. Naomi and Ruth walked back to Israel with nothing; they had to let go of their own expectations and act and work when the opportunity arose. They had to have the courage to act when God told them to act, and as they did, it was quite amazing how God provided. Boaz, a wealthy and distant relative of Naomi's, ended up marrying Ruth. Ruth's great-grandson was King David. In the end, Naomi's friends called her blessed: "Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." (Ruth 4:14-15)

It's amazing what happens when we give up control to God. It is frightening to do that. Somehow we fear that if we give up control, something bad will happen.

You know this is the Christian story. It's been my Christian story and ultimately it is *the* Christian story. I remember what I think was the first time I felt God tell me he wanted me to *completely surrender my life to him*. I remember where I was. I was on the balcony of my great-aunt's old apartment. I was probably something like 10 years old, maybe a little younger. And I remember when I heard that voice (not audibly, more like an impression) my reaction was an instant: *no!* Immediately I had a vision of being in a fire and being severely and painfully disfigured. I guess that was my greatest fear: a combination of physical pain and being ostracized from society because of being disfigured. I was afraid that if I gave God control he would bring about my worst fears. I remember at the time in spite of my fear I tried to surrender to God and to give God control. The truth is it has been a constant game of tug of war. I keep trying to pick up the pen to write and control my own life and God keeps nudging me to let him write my life. His penmanship is a 1000 times more beautiful than mine.

This is the Christian story. Jesus came to this earth to give his life away for us. He too had to continually surrender his will to God's will. Remember in the garden the night before he died he cried out to God, "Father, if it be your will let this cup pass from me, but not my will, but yours be done".

Jesus is calling you to surrender your life to him. Don't be afraid. God is good, and will help you to become the person you were created to be. You were created not to control, but to have a powerful influence for good in some part this world. You can only get there when you give up control. God does not promise that bad things won't happen, but he does promise that you will not be alone.

If this is speaking to you today; if you know it is time to let go of trying to control your life and the lives of others around you; if you're tired of making a mess of your life, I want to invite you to respond in a simple but perhaps frightening way. If you have a pen on you, I want to invite you to bring that pen and to lay it on the communion table in front of the cross. In this way I want you to say: "Jesus, be the author of my life". If the only pen you have is your favourite pen on earth... well, maybe that's even more symbolic that you let it go. But at the end of the service if you like, you can come back up and pick up your pen. The others that are left we'll put to use in God's service. I'm going to invite Christina Buhler to sing the song *You Raise me Up*, because that is what God does for us when we surrender our hearts and lives. God will raise you up to stand on mountains, walk on stormy seas, and God will raise you up to be more than you can ever be alone.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.