

August 10, 2014

I imagine most of us have seen—and heard—what I heard and saw the other day. I was in my car in a turning lane when the arrow for turning left turned green. I was about two cars from the front car in line. The driver of that car must have been distracted and did not respond to the green arrow. About three seconds after the light turned green it started—someone behind me started honking their horn. Not a gentle “tap, tap” but one long, loud blast, followed by two more. I think it startled the whole city block, but whether from passive aggressive stubbornness or continued inattention, the driver at the front of the line did not move right away. Eventually the car did move and we all made it through the light, including the person I assumed was the “honker.”

You see, I could figure out who it was based on what they did next. They raced by me at high speed and when I looked over, I saw a person in an obviously agitated state. He flew up the left hand lane and when he reached the car with the slow-reacting driver, he hesitated, honked, and made a universal gesture communicating his feelings. Then he sped up and drove on. Now in an ideal world, I would have found this driver a few miles later, pulled over by the police. But at least this day, it did not happen. I never saw the honker again. Thankfully he did not have a “Honk if you love Jesus” bumper sticker on the back of his car.

But what this driver did give that day is an example-- on a simple and silly scale-- of a big problem in our world. The problem is control. I believe that many of the problems I have—and I imagine many of us have—are related to issues of control. Who is in charge, who should be in charge, and who is fighting to be in charge in life? Also, how do we react when it becomes clear that we are not in control of the important issues of our life?

From its earliest days, the church has addressed the issue of control in our primal creeds and confessions. Paul alluded to probably the earliest Christian confession in today’s epistle when he wrote: “Jesus is Lord.” The church has stated that to be a Christian, it is about more than a set of ideological beliefs; it is about relationships. The primary relationship for us as Christians is with Jesus; and the tenor of that relationship is that we rely on Jesus as our Lord to direct and empower us to live a life that is whole and holy.

The belief that “Jesus is Lord” is critical. Because the opposite belief—that I am in control and need to do whatever it takes to get what I want in life—is antithetical to Christian discipleship. And to be honest, that effort to be in control is stressful and eventually debilitating as a way to live. Let me give you a few examples.

A day in and day out area where control becomes an issue is in large organizations. I can speak to that based on twenty-four years working for Fortune 500 companies and now seven years working within The Episcopal Church. Outside of the U.S. government, you don't get much bigger and controlling than big corporations or the church. The stress that often comes from being part of a large organization is what to do when we don't agree with what the larger entity has decided. How do we respond to that?

I can tell you from my corporate life that there are some typical behaviors. One option is to go up the chain of command with my concerns. Occasionally that might result in a tweak, especially if the decision was made just one level above me. But if the decision was made at headquarters that feedback process is unlikely to make a difference in the decisions that have been made.

So what would often happen next is a combination of things. First, I would get together with like-minded employees, usually people at the same grade level as me and "discuss" the decision over a beverage. Depending on what the beverage was (coffee or beer), we would tend to open up more and more about how bad the decision was and how we would all suffer from it. Next I would try to implement the decision, sometimes grudgingly; sometimes with a smile and the best spin I could muster. Sometimes the decision ended up being a good one; and sometimes not.

Now regardless of how it turned out and how I reacted in my professional role, I can tell you that over time, that issue of control can begin to wear on folks. Our common reactions remind me of the cartoon I saw posted in many different offices over the years. It stated—"Stress is that confusion you have when your mind overrides your body's desire to (yell at) someone who desperately deserves it" (I cleaned that up some). If we go through life with that type of stress over issues beyond our control, we become unhappy people.

Issues of control are not limited to working in large organizations or waiting for someone ahead of us in line to see the light and turn left. Some issues of control have to do with critical relationships, like our spouse, our children, or our parents. These relationships are so important to us and our happiness and identity as human beings. We want to be happy and we want the people we love to be happy. Because of that, we bring expectations to our relationships, and because they are so important, some of us work hard to get the outcomes we desire for the people we love.

A relatively safe example is what goes on between teenagers and their parents. As a dad, I wanted my teen children to be happy, safe, successful—all those criteria that most of us share. I was not one of those parents that said what success needed to be—I would have been as happy whether one was an athlete or an artist or whatever. But our children had their

challenges as they moved through the teen years and I had challenges in how best to respond to them and manage my expectations for them. Because no matter what my good intentions were, it was very easy to cross the line between helping and trying to control the people closest to me that I cared about so much.

I want to keep our kids' stories private, so let me give you an example from another family that none of you know. Our son grew up with a boy his age that was very talented musically. He played viola and could even compose music at a young age. His dad was a pilot and a graduate from the Air Force Academy where he played football. Understandably, the dad wanted his son to play football, too. And the son was actually pretty good at it. But he loved music. You can probably write the rest of the story—there was tension between them that continued and got worse as the boy became a young man. By trying to control someone else, even with what the dad saw as good intentions, it ended up putting a long term strain on a very important relationship.

Issues about control pop up in all different areas of life and too often we “honk our horns,” so to speak, instead of remembering the core belief of our faith—“Jesus is Lord” (not me). Some areas are heart-breaking and the people involved are stuck in something beyond corporate politics or even parenting. Just think of dealing with serious illnesses, struggles with addiction, or even natural disasters. We can be devastated because we want stability and a healthy sense of control in life. Yet even then, our confession of faith—Jesus is Lord—still shows us the way to endure.

Because even in a crisis, even when we want something healthy and good for others, it is important to learn and remember that we are not in control, we are not absolute arbiters of outcomes. What we cannot control, clearly, are other people and circumstances. Struggling with that lack of control is where our stress comes from in life. But that hard reality does not mean we are helpless. With God's help, we can control how we respond to other people and difficult circumstances.

So for example, if we love someone who is making decisions with which we disagree, our first response can be to pause and pray for them and commend them and their life to God. When we talk with them, we can take a deep breath and listen before we talk. And when our buttons get pushed, like only a loved one can do, we can try to disconnect the wiring to our typical responses of anger or frustration or fear; and make space instead for God's Spirit to guide us. Now don't get me wrong—this is hard to do—but when I take the time to practice being in control of my response instead of trying to control someone else's behavior, I find I am able to cope better and maintain a healthier relationship with the person I love, regardless of what happens.

Now all this advice is helpful, but it is incomplete. We are inadequate to face these issues of control based on our own will power and moral virtue. We may feel overwhelmed by our circumstances. That is when our faith is so critical. When we are not strong enough, when the circumstances of our lives are just too much, we can turn to Jesus to help us when we feel out of control and scared or angry or uncertain. Because of our confession that “Jesus is Lord,” we have access to the example of his life and the examples of holy men and women who follow him, too. And we have access to his grace that can give us a different type of power when we struggle with control about other people and situations.

The type of power that Jesus provides gives us peace. It enables us to pray and have the inner strength to commend the people we love and the circumstances we worry about to God’s tender care. That type of power enables us to ask for forgiveness and to forgive. And Jesus’ power gives us humility so that we focus on what we can control with God’s help; versus what is beyond our control. When we have that type of power in our lives, then we can let go of our need to control what we really can’t control anyway. Getting that clear—trusting that Jesus is Lord, not me-- is the key to our salvation and a life filled with grace.

Amen.