

Session #1 – Presentation

What I've been most aware of over the last few months is that anger and annoyance and resentment are close at hand. So is fear, but I would almost always rather pretend I'm not afraid. Somehow the irritability is easier. All told, there have been many times when I really didn't feel "at home in all circumstances." And I'm pretty sure that what is true for me is true for most of us: When we don't make ourselves at home we can get hostile.

Here are some of the places I've experienced hostility recently: toward people who drive too fast and who drive too slow. Those who set off fireworks at 1 am. Toward people who don't deal with masks exactly the way I do. I've felt hostile toward politicians, my fellow citizens, my co-workers, my husband, my friend Robert, sometimes toward my brothers and sisters in the Order of the Ascension, and on very rare occasions, toward church leaders. Did I have reasons for my hostility? Oh, yes, I did. I had many reasons!

The truth is that *everyone* has reasons. We live in a world where most all of us are trying to figure out who is right and who is wrong. And doing that pits us against each other. It leads to our finding solidarity in hating a common enemy. Yet the Gospel says, "love your enemies." God says, "I don't care that you're right and they're wrong and they're evil—I need you to love them. You need to treat them with respect even if you think they're dumb as a rock or even hateful." What are we supposed to do with all our good reasons if we need to love people with all their own bad reasons?

I think it's really important to know that loving people is not about papering over differences or pretending that all approaches are equal. For example, we do have real differences about what political and social policies we should pursue. We also sometimes have serious differences about the ends we're trying to achieve. Sorting all that out requires creating space for deep listening and genuine understanding, including listening to people who drive us up a wall. As Christians, our listening needs to be grounded in the command to love rather than in what is maybe a more natural desire to win.

My husband and I had been having a repetitive argument about Seattle politics. I was absolutely convinced that he was advocating something truly immoral. He was absolutely convinced that his way was the only way we'd achieve justice. And what I found was that the more I emphasized how wrong he was, the more angry and desperate I became and the more insistent he was that his way was the only way. In some ways, it felt like the very survival of the city would be determined by the outcome of our argument. It had a life-and-death feel about it. Somehow, I did get a hold of myself. I literally thought, "I married him for a reason, though I can't quite remember what it was. God loves him and I need to try to love him, too." And then I just took a deep breath and said something like, "Well, I think it's a really serious problem and I can see that we're looking at it very differently. I feel scared

about the consequences of this continuing and I hear what you're saying about needing to take action. I'm going to take a break from this conversation. I hope we'll both keep thinking about it." I had to be willing at that moment to give up my need to control him, to let it go even though the stakes seemed so high.

And one of the issues we face is that the stakes often *are* really high. Obviously one aspect of the current times is that the pandemic brings us directly up against death, which is of course the ultimate evidence of our lack of control. We keep imagining, though, that we *can* control it somehow. I know I can find myself putting more and more stock in the ultimate illusion that I don't have to die. And that is true both about death in the end, but also this illusion that I don't have to die to self, that I don't have to give up my reasons and my rightness.

I don't think it's an accident that the pandemic coincides with significant political and social unrest. Our lives have been upended in ways we did not expect and there are serious costs—from loss of life and illness, as well as the cost of joblessness and lack of economic activity. We have some influence over these things, maybe, but we don't have control over any of them. And I know that I find that at best unsettling and often very scary.

I've found it really helpful to think about some of this using a model called Circles of Influence. This isn't a specifically religious model but it definitely has applications to spiritual life. I'm going to pull it up on the screen. [SHARE SCREEN] You can see that the center of the model is what I control. It's small. The next ring out, which is a little bigger, is what I influence. What are the ways I have impact—positive and negative--on people and events that I don't actually control? And the biggest one—I always think it's important to point out that this is NOT drawn to scale—is what I neither control nor influence.

So much of the spiritual life is based on staying connected to the center ring, while recognizing and letting go of the outer ring. When I've become very frustrated with my city council members, for example, I've found it helpful to recognize that I don't control them. I'm not responsible for what they do and I can't change them. I can though spend some energy in what I influence. I can vote – casting a ballot is something I control, but the outcome of the election is only something I can influence. I can encourage others to vote and I can engage in respectful dialogue about policy differences. I can maybe even write to my city council members. [STOP SHARE]

But the most important area is what I *do* control, and especially the spiritual practices I engage, the ways I put myself in the pathways of grace. Tending to my spiritual life by keeping core disciplines in place has been what's most obvious to me in my own ability to make myself at home.

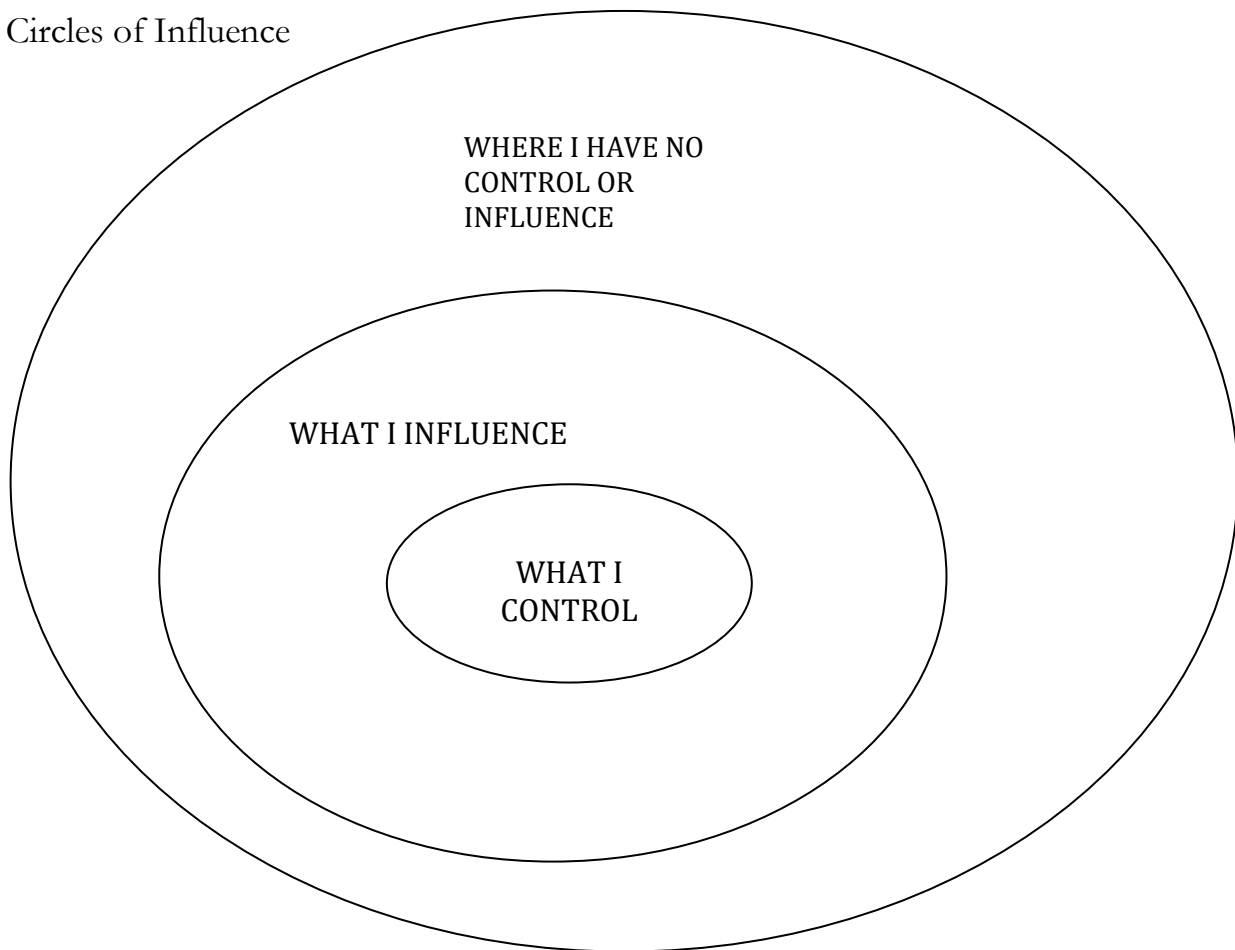
I have really missed in-person worship, and especially the Eucharist. While I don't like Sunday worship on Zoom, I've made a point to participate. My parish has very strong social

connections, and as an introvert that's sometimes hard for me. But it's been really quite nice to be able to hear a little bit from so many people before and after worship, as well as at the shared homily. Normally, I would just give most folks a hug on Sundays, but not actually talk to them. So part of my practice has been to simply show up and listen.

I have also found renewal in saying the daily office first thing in the morning. Before the pandemic, the Office was often mostly a duty. Now I feel a bit more in touch with the transcendent. I make a point of trying to create a little silence beforehand. I've also been struck by how often the readings for morning and evening prayer speak to the turmoil of the present day, and I find myself noticing a deep connection to how salvation history continues to be revealed. It's definitely helped me feel a bit more courageous.

Maybe most important, I've spent more time in intercession. I have my normal lists of people I pray for. But I also am holding before God on my heart exactly those people I'm most frustrated with. Including my city council members. And when I do that, I find my hostility softens a bit. Maybe I have a little more empathy, a little more openness. Maybe I have a little more sense that my enemies are also God's children. And while I continue to be pretty certain I'm right about so many things, there are more and more times when I know a respite from fear and hostility. When I am blessed with a little glimpse of what it is to die to my own rightness while entering into the divine life of God's love and mercy.

Circles of Influence



You can use the circles as a worksheet. In a particular situation, where are you? Do you have direct control and authority? Or is it something you can influence? Or is this a case that is outside your range on control and influence? Obviously you want to make interventions in areas you have influence or control.

You can also use the circles to scan your relationship with the whole parish system. In each circle identify specific areas, groups, and circumstances. This may help you identify situations where you can make useful interventions.

The circles may also be used in a reflective process as follows:

- How you use the control & influence you have – how does your behavior match your values?
- What is the relationship between stress & frustration in your life and control & influence?
- When you have no/little control or influence how do you usually respond? How might you better self-manage your response?
- What practices do you engage that help you see things realistically?