

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
October 22, 2006

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Scriptures: Isaiah 53:4-12, Psalm 91:9-16, Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

You gotta love those disciples. Because they are just so, well, so human. Like in today's text. James and John come to Jesus and, like two little kids who go tell their mom or dad they are going to ask something and they want to be told ahead of time the answer will be "yes." "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And Jesus said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." They are asking to be granted the two highest positions of power in this Kingdom they believe Jesus will establish after he overthrows the Romans. Never mind, that they really haven't a clue what it is they are actually asking for.

And then later, when the ten heard what James and John had asked Jesus, they began to be angry with James and John. Probably, as another pastor suggested, because they were upset that they hadn't thought of it first. Like so many, they were all stuck on a certain way of viewing power: that power gives one privileges, and perks. It's good to be the boss because then you can boss other people around, get people to do your bidding. Your power can enable you to live a life of ease, and pleasure.

Unfortunately, that is not how Jesus saw it. Jesus' response to them, about rulers not lording over their subjects, and the greatest ones being the servants, was not what they were looking for. But Jesus revealed to them, both by his words, and his actions, what power really is, and how power really works. We can learn at least three things from Jesus' response to the twelve disciples.

The first is that power is for serving others, not for serving oneself. But it takes a certain sense of maturity, perhaps wisdom, to understand that, to live that out. I'll use the example I know the best. Pastors and their congregations. In churches, pastors have a lot of power. And pastors have to decide how they are going to use that power. People sometimes refer to a certain way of being pastor, as being Herr Pastor. Whatever the pastor said, is what everyone in the congregation did. Or else. I don't think I would be a very good Herr Pastor.

Sometimes pastors have been encouraged to think of themselves as CEO's. Sometimes congregations look for their pastors to be little more than personal chaplains. These days, a popular image is that pastors should be coaches, coaching the people to be better disciples, their congregations to be better teams of disciples.

Personally, I have been trying to take the advice that I read in an illustration about leadership. I forget who the quote is from, but it was about a man whose mentor told him that to be the best boss and manager he should spend about 10% of his time hiring and evaluating, and if need be, firing, his employees. The other 90% of his time should be spent doing everything he could possibly do to help his employees do their work as well as possible.

Sometimes folks in a congregation think that the pastor is the primary person doing ministry at the church. But I think everyone who is part of a church has a ministry. And my job, my ministry if you will, is to do everything I possibly can to help each of you do your ministry the best you can. My power is for serving you, helping you use your power to serve others.

The second thing we learn from Jesus about power is that power is for making a positive difference. Jesus used his power to cast out demons, to heal the sick, to calm the seas. He was always using his power to make a positive difference in someone's life.

There is a movie called "The Emperor's Club." It is the story of a teacher who teaches history, the history of Western Civilization, in a prestigious private boys prep school. He begins the class each year by having one of the students read a plaque above the door. The plaque itself appears to be an ancient artifact. The student delivers an uncertain reading of an inscription that makes little sense to him:

I am Shutruk Nahunte, King of Ashand and Susa, Sovereign of the Land of Elam. By the Command of Inshushinak, I destroyed Sippar, took the Stele of Nirah-Sin, and brought it back to Elam, where I erected it as an offering to my God, Inshushinak. Shutruk Nahunte 1158 B.C.

The teacher then asks the class, "Is anyone familiar with this fellow? Texts are permissible, but you won't find him there. Shutruk Nahunte. King. Sovereign of Elam. Destroyer of Sippar. But behold his accomplishments cannot be found in any history book. Why? Because great ambition and conquest without contribution are without significance."

In our day, one might think of the powerful executives of multi-national companies, the millionaires and billionaires. Most of their names will pass from history, almost unnoticed because they have used their wealth and power for few but themselves. But we will long remember folks like Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. Desmond Tutu, Cesar Chavez. These used their power to make positive differences for the people around them.

The third thing we can learn about power from Jesus is that there are different kinds of power, most of them are quiet, unassuming, and actually more powerful. Jesus did not seek the limelight, he did not seek to be first, or popular, or influential. He didn't try to get to some level of achievement and then use his power. He worked from wherever he was, to do whatever he could. On the road, in a person's home, down by the lake. He used his power and made a difference in the inconspicuous places.

Someone once asked Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, "what is the hardest instrument to play?" Without a moment's hesitation he replied, "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists. But to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn, or second flute, now that's a problem! And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony." Think about that for a minute. The ones who make the music have harmony, are the second violins, second flutes, second French horns. They are the ones with the power to make the music what it is. Without them, there is no spine-tingling richness, no drama, no resolution of chords.

And it is the same within any ministry that a church does. I might be up front. But I am not the one who makes Emanuel what Emanuel is. You are. You are the ones who give this place it's depth, richness, impact, drama, and community.

Jesus, by his example in life, showed us how power works, how to use it for the glory of God's Kingdom. He showed us how to serve, how to help others, to wash feet, and feed the hungry. But even more amazing and wonderful than that is how, in his death, Jesus took what looked like utter defeat, utter weakness, and turned it into the victory of love over hatred, of forgiveness over guilt and shame, of compassion over self-centeredness. By his death, Jesus gained for us redemption from sin and death, forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation with God our creator.

If Jesus had chosen the power of conquest and domination he would certainly have overthrown the Roman Empire. But his would have been just one more in the long line of political and military maneuvers in the ancient world. As it was, Jesus chose the power that changed human history, the power that enables us to know God who loves and forgives. Jesus showed us the power of compassion, and non-violence. Jesus gives to us the certain knowledge of everlasting life, which makes us unafraid to risk loving and serving and surrendering to others in this life. Jesus showed us what power really is, how it really works. And then Jesus calls us to go and do likewise. Amen.