

Grace and peace to you from our all-powerful, all-relational God, who is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Power. The word power. What do you think of when you hear this word? What words or concepts come to mind? I'm going to give you a moment to really think it over.

Ok. I'm not a mind reader but I'm willing to bet your thoughts about power were more negative than positive. Just a show of hands, who was thinking about the word controlling when it comes to power? How about manipulative? Exclusionary? Unequal? Divisive? Tyrannic? Abusive?

What about status-seeking? Did that come up for anyone? Considering our Gospel text for this morning, power in the form of status is a pretty big one for today. This was definitely what James and John were after when they engaged Jesus with their rather forward demand. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" they asserted. "And that is...we want you to make us your favorites."

See, most people are self-serving when it comes to power, thus our negative associations with it. Power used in controlling, manipulative ways makes us frustrated! Later, our text says the disciples were angry with James and John for having said what they did. Well, I don't blame them one bit! If I were a part of their posse back then, I would have been rather frustrated with James and John myself! I mean, who do they think they are?

Similar to anyone who misuses power out there, it leaves us wondering, what gives, right? How did they start viewing themselves as more special than anyone else? Per usual, Jesus uses this exchange as an opportunity to teach about a whole new understanding of power that has nothing to do with the kind of limited, top-down, unilateral power many are used to or seeking. Instead Jesus wanted to teach about power that has everything to do with what it means to be powerful with and alongside other people.

Jesus says, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." I suspect this is not what the disciples were expecting Jesus to say about James and John's request at all. Then again, when was anything Jesus taught or demonstrated ever commonplace? We know the answer. Hardly ever.

What he was instead wanting to teach about was a mutually-transactional kind of power exchange that utilizes the power we all have from within in a relational, multilateral, centrifugal way. You all know what a centrifuge is, right? It's an energy, often created by a machine, that spins around really quickly, creating a force that acts outward on a body moving around a center. In Jesus' case, the center we, as the body of Christ, spin around is God's love. As we spin and turn around this center, our power spreads out,

creating a ripple effect that builds on itself and grows, creating big unavoidable waves of good energy. The result is collective, exponential, relational-power that has no zero-sum limits. As opposed to unilateral, top-down power that is hoarded in fear of a limited supply, the kind of power Jesus was promoting puts everyone on equal footing with equal amounts of power that never run out.

Thus, how we view and use power is so important. Used in a negative way, it really can invoke all kinds of evil. Used in a humble, servant-like, and loving way, it creates strength and courage for all involved.

There's a quote about power that often floats around in our conversations. It states, "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Have you ever heard this quote? It was coined by a guy named Lord Acton who was an English historian, politician, and writer in the 17th century. This phrase, written in a letter to an Anglican bishop, is actually misquoted all the time. The actual quote is: "Power **tends** to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The difference, when inserting the word "tends" (versus leaving it out) subsequently manifests a less-common way of thinking about power.

Like money, power is what it is. It's a tool used to act in the world and, like all things, it is God-given. It is the strength we all have within us to act in any sort of way and we can use it for good. The word "power" is just a noun in the English language. However, in Spanish, the same word, "poder", is used as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it means "power" of course, but when used as a verb it means "to be able," which is significant. To have power is to be able to do things. When love is mixed in a certain kind of power results that's different from what we're used to.

Which brings me to another point I want to make about power. I'll use another quote, this time made popular by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He's known for saying, "Power without love is tyranny, but love without power is sentimentality." Quite the think-phrase, yes? We've already discussed power without love leading to tyranny, but what about love without power leading to sentimental, lofty, flower-power thinking? This kind of thinking happens all the time in our world, right?

Sometimes it shows up in the form of expectations we place on others that have little amounts of accountability backing them up. Politicians, institutions, our children, each other, we often expect everybody to do the right, love-demonstrating thing. When they don't, though--which is often the case due to sin and our intrinsic nature to sin--we're usually disappointed. Without a mutually powerful faith and body of people or parents, friends, or neighbors invested in us (or them) and our (or their) decision-making growth and potential, people (or we) definitely have the ability to become tyrannical or corruptive by default.

We need boundaries, which means all of us need to strike a good balance between God's law and God's gospel. In the formula of Concord, Martin Luther (this time I'm referencing the founder of our denomination) is known for making this distinction. He

wrote, “Everything that proclaims something about our sin and God’s wrath is the proclamation of the law, however and whenever it may take place. On the other hand, the gospel is the kind of proclamation that points to and bestows nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V:12). The difference between law and gospel is a concept we’ll be talking more about in our adult forum during coffee hour today so please join us. If you don’t, just remember, boundaries centered around love, as in the case of God’s law, for example, serve us in powerful ways. Without them we’re just a bunch of peace-loving gurus with no grit or gusto backing up our actions.

We have to have loving accountability and mutual commitment to create the kind of relational power needed to shift societal ills and change people’s lives. Such power puts everyone on both the giving and receiving ends of love. Whenever Jesus says, “but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” this is what he means. Jesus is wanting us to take our power and mutually use it for the benefit of the common good.

By now, some of you may be asking, “Well, where do I start? How do I start sharing my power and receiving the benefits of other people’s power? How do I hold myself accountable to displaying the positivity of my power while asking others to do the same? It’s simple, really. We get to know each other more than we possibly already do. We take advantage of every opportunity today and everyday to dive a little deeper into the relationships we hold and those we’ve yet to develop and then we decide to join forces based on what connects us and act for the benefit of our mutual interests.

We may need some help with this. This is a whole different sermon but due to a variety of societal factors, we’re out of practice when it comes to the fine art of conversation and listening to what’s going on in other people’s lives. We, in fact, know less about each other’s worries, joys, concerns, families, struggles, friends, celebrations, and passions today than any other time in history. And so, my hope is to reach out to the Evangelism Team and others this fall to come up with a little strategy for our congregation (poor Evangelism Team, they’ve yet to know I’m coming for them). Our focus will be on deepening our relationships with each other within the congregation so as to mutually and more effectively live out our faith in the world.

Until I meet with them to start strategizing, I’m going to ask something from all of you in the meantime. Remember today’s sermon and the distinctions made concerning power. Power can be used to build up individuals and communities or it can be used to abusively destroy people’s lives. What matters in terms of how we use our power is our disposition toward a servant’s heart that is backed by mutual accountability, an openness to really listen in on what’s going on in other people’s lives, and then love, of course. It always boils down to love.

This topic doesn’t end here. More on building loving, relational power to come. For now, let us stand to sing, heeding our calling to go out into the world with open hearts

for service. Upon such heart-filled foundations we will be a beacon for those who feel power-less in the world.

With that, all God's children said, Amen!