

The Love of Power or the Power of Love? (Let's Listen)

Mark 10:35-45

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In a 2014 interview “60 Minutes” interview, FBI Director James Comey reminded us that we should be thankful that we have a system of checks and balances so that no one individual and no one branch of government ends up with too much power.

He told Scott Pelley of CBS, “I believe that Americans should be deeply skeptical of government power. You cannot trust people in power. The founders knew that. That’s why they divided power among three branches, to set interest against interest.”

(<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/james-comey-fired-fbi-director-in-2014-60-minutes/>)

Does “power corrupt and absolute power corrupt absolutely,” as British historian Lord Acton once said? If not, the temptation is certainly there for all of us to use power, however little it may be, to our advantage.

I am reminded of the first church I pastored. I was asked by the pastor search committee if I had a copy of “Robert’s Rules of Order.”

I thought it was an odd question.

“No,” I responded.

“Well you better get one,” said the chairman of the committee.

I went into the first monthly business meeting with little knowledge of those rules and it was a disaster. As it turned out, there was a man in his 80’s who sat in the back who knew just enough “Robert’s Rules of Order” to hold the rest of the congregation hostage.

He had been a business meeting bully for years. It was his hobby. People were afraid of him because he had the power of rules. He would quote a Robert’s Rule and people were afraid to say whether he was right or wrong.

Not only did I purchase a copy of “Robert’s Rule of Order,” but I enrolled in a class in Atlanta taught by the parliamentarian of the Georgia Baptist Convention. Then I taught my congregation what I learned about parliamentary procedure. By giving everyone an understanding of the rules, it took away the man’s power to bully the church in business meetings.

One reason the television series “Survivor” has become one of America’s top 100 greatest TV Shows of All Time is that people are interested in alliances, ploys, maneuvering, tricks, lies, skills, abilities, and power plays. All of these things are used to help contestants on the island survive and not be voted off. Life is sometimes like Survivor.

It can also like a horse race. All of us are jockeying for position. If any of us have any ambition at all and we see an opportunity to better our position, we will likely seize the opportunity. Some people will seize the opportunity, even if it is unethical. If people have any access to power at all, many will seize it.

James and John, two of Jesus's disciples, were consumed with thoughts of power. Before becoming his disciples, they worked with their father on the Sea of Galilee. They may have had a very honest business. However, somewhere, they must have learned the power of negotiation skills. They must have learned how to take advantage of the moment.

Along with Peter, Jesus was close to James and John. They became part of his inner circle. Jesus took these three aside with him to pray on several occasions. We have used Jesus' small group concept as our model for our small prayer groups during our 100 Days of Prayer.

Sometimes, when we are close to people, we think that closeness grants us special privileges. James and John emerged as two who tried to take advantage of their special access to Jesus.

As Jesus is preparing his heart for the cross, Mark paints a picture of the 12 disciples playing "Survivor." They are jockeying for position. Mark tells the story of the disciples arguing about which one among them is the greatest and then James and John pull the ultimate power play.

They take advantage of having Jesus alone, so they ask him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

Before I finish this story, I want to pause here.

We are over halfway through our 100 Days of Prayer. This is sermon eight in a 10-sermon series on "Writing Our Future Story."

If you are praying during these 100 Days of Prayer, that means you have some power in our church, however limited or extensive you may think it is. Prayer is making a connection to God's power grid.

However, when we talk to God, there is a great temptation for us to pray like James and John. "Lord, I want you to do for me whatever I ask." Then with all sincerity and with all earnestness, we ask for God to give us what we want. "Lord, when it come to the future of my church, I want you to do whatever I ask."

That kind of selfish prayer is an easy and tempting way for all us to pray as we imagine the future of our church.

However, this is not how Jesus taught the disciples to pray. How did he teach them to pray?

"Our Father, which art in heaven. Hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven..."

We are not supposed to ask God to conform to our will. We are supposed to ask God what his will is for our lives and for our church and then we should ask God to help us conform our lives around His will.

If we need power for anything, we need the power to conform to the will of God.

Even though Jesus had just told the disciples that he had to suffer and die and be raised from the dead, James and John were not listening to that. They did not want to hear that Jesus was going to conform to anything because they were consumed with positions of power.

Whenever we are trying to push through our agenda, we run the risk of being blinded by power, which keeps us from seeing where God is at work. It keeps us from hearing what God is saying.

Let's get back to the conversation James and John were having with Jesus. This was their request for Jesus: "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory" (37).

When Jesus asked them if they could drink from the same cup and be baptized with the same baptism he was about to be baptized with, they thought they were all in. Of course, they didn't have a clue about the cross that awaited Jesus.

Jesus knew that one day they would suffer just as he was about to but he also told them he had no right to grant them their request.

When the rest of the disciples found out about their request, how do you think that played out in the group? It played out like that kind of stuff does on "Survivor," the television show. They felt betrayed.

When we jockey for power among ourselves for personal gain, it can poison the well of relationships. You may win whatever piece of the pie you are seeking, but you destroy relationships in the process. In the church, people end up leaving.

We may solidify power but people go out the back door. Lots of people are O.K. with that. That is one of the things that frustrates every pastor I know.

When new people come, these people continue to guard their position. They are kind until someone gets close to their position of power, then they growl and show their teeth.

The more power plays that are carried out among the members, the less opportunity vision has of ever being in the driver's seat. The church will never grow if it is in the power clutches of a few. The church may be managed well, but it will never soar with faith. This is the path churches travel until they are managed to death.

Within the world, power, authority, and arrogance appeal to a lot of people. It's one of the reasons bullying is so prevalent and why there is such a high occurrence of sexual assault.

James Comey said you cannot trust people in power. Of course, he was a person of great power himself. What he was alluding to is that we must have a system of checks and balances, even of ourselves.

Comey is right about power. It is an intoxicating drug. Even a little bit of it in any of us is fraught with danger. However, it also has great potential for good.

What we must do consistently is listen to God, listen to others, and to ourselves, to make sure that we are not abusing the power that God has given to us and instructed us to use.

The way that Jesus tried to help keep the disciples grounded was by bringing a child into their midst. Children were people who had no rights and no power. He had a child stand among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them. "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (vs. 36-37)

I have a feeling that because Jesus had included James and John in his inner circle, they might have felt that Jesus wasn't talking to them. They might have felt that his message was meant for the rest of the disciples but it really didn't apply to them.

Have you ever felt that way about anything Jesus said?

That's what power does. It whispers to us. "That doesn't really apply to you. You don't have to obey that rule. You don't have to follow that policy. Those ethical standards don't really matter."

Some people who have power believe they can do what they want. They will take advantage of others in a marriage, in friendships, in a dating relationship, with employees, with those of lower economic status, and even to keep a church from becoming what God wants it to be, because they can.

God wants our hearts to be open to receive his Spirit and his voice. Instead of praying, "Lord, this is what I want you to do for me," might we ask God,

"Lord, what is your will for my job? What is your will for my family? What is your will for my church?"

What would you have me do that I have been reluctant to do?

What ministry do you want me to be involved in that I have held back on being a part of?

What "Big Holy Audacious Goal" should our church set for the sake of the kingdom and our witness in this community?

We might be able to sum this up by saying that James and John were consumed with the love of power and not the power of love. Now what about you?

Let's say James and John's request, "Lord give us what we ask," represents the love of power, and Jesus' prayer, "Lord, may your will be done," represents the power of love.

On which side would your life mostly fall? Which prayer are you more likely to pray?

If you are seeking God's will, chances are you are giving a lot of yourself away like Jesus did. So your life would be characterized more by, "Thy will be done."

On which side do we fall as a church?

The power of love means we should be all about others. Relationships are in the front seat. We are being driven by the vision God has given us.

However, it's up to you to imagine it and write that story.

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