

“The Power Question”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, Sept. 20, 2020

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: www.fumcgj.org/sermons-2/

Scripture Text:

- Luke 22:24-27 [NRSV]
- References are also made to Jim Wallis, *Christ in Crisis? Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins/Harper One, 2019)

OPENING

First part of Will Jones’ story – his early history and calling as Jim Wallis presents this and his first convocation w/ foot washing as president of Bethany College in Lindsborg, KS, 2016-2019. (Wallis, 120-123) (*Break here for sermon content.*)

TO THE SCRIPTURES

Scripture setting for today: The Last Supper.

Jesus’ broken body and shed blood represent the ultimate in servant leadership, but the disciples found themselves distracted by the question of which one of them was the greatest in the group. If this night represented their “final exam”, they failed miserably!

But Jesus took this as an opportunity to teach. (*Reminder of Luke 22:25-27*). And John’s Gospel tells of Jesus washing His disciples’ feet as an example of the servant leadership that they were to

follow. It’s the illustration behind the teaching of Luke 22:26, “*the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.*”

All of this raises the question, “What is the nature of Power in the Kingdom of Heaven?”

SERMON THOUGHTS: The Nature of Power and the Kingdom of Heaven

I. Power and Leadership in the Kingdom of Heaven is about *serving for the sake of “the other” and the common good*. It is NOT about meeting one’s own needs for importance, significance, or domination; in other words, it’s not about self-absorption or self-aggrandizement. It’s not about ego and narcissism.

Neither is it about tribalism, which is self-absorption turned outward to one’s group, but *only* one’s group, not the greater community.

II. Power in the Kingdom of Heaven is about Attitude / (Godly) Character

A. The Way of Jesus vs. The Way of the “Benefactors” (Wallis, 127)

Cambridge Dictionary and “benefactor”:

“Someone who gives money to a person or organization, usually without expecting anything back in return.”

B. Jesus was being critical of “The Way of the ‘Benefactors’” in Luke; His comments dripped with sarcasm and accusation.

III. Power and Humility – Phil. 2:5-11

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that wasⁱⁿ in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

IV. Power and Truth (*tie to last week*)

- A. Distortion of the truth, Misrepresentation, and Lies are the signs of evil and danger in those who wield power as leaders and are the signs of an unhealthy psyche and emotional and spiritual immaturity.
- B. Warnings, if based in Truth, are necessary and important. But, if deliberately distorted to consolidate power, intimidate, destabilize, instill fear, or to otherwise manipulate public opinion, they are wicked/evil.

V. Putting Fear into the service of consolidating power deserves its own treatment: Larry Beckner next week.

VI. Power is “a Sacred Trust”, not an end goal (Wallis, 122).

Wallis writes:

“When power becomes the goal over service, self-interest over public interest, conflicts of interest over the common good, winning and losing over mutuality and compromise, and personal narcissism over shared benefit, we are headed for deep trouble.” (Wallis, 122)

(*Reflect on this from my own professional, clergy code of ethics. Next to God’s calling me to serve Him in “set apart”, fulltime ministry, affirmed and endorsed by the UMC’s ordination, the trust the congregation places in me to serve them with integrity and in ways that reflect my respect for ministry as a sacred trust is of first importance.*)

SERMON THOUGHTS: Government – the Institutional Exercise of Power

I. The history of the institutional exercise of power can be summed up in the phrase, “might makes right” OR wealth, privilege, position, etc. creates rulers/kings.

A. Brief survey of this through ancient civilizations. (*Mistakenly left out the Greek development of democracy, with Roman “copying” before the days of the Roman Empire – my bad!*)

II. Democracy is about keeping power in check because, as John Dalberg-Acton of 19th century England wrote, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Some fifty-five years later, a compatriot of Acton, CS Lewis, would make a Theological Case for Democracy using reasoning Acton would agree with:

I am a...[believer in democracy] because I believe in the Fall of Man.

I think most people...[believe in democracy] for the opposite reason. A great deal of democratic enthusiasm descends from the ideas of people...who believed in democracy because they thought mankind so wise and good that everyone deserves a share in the government.

The danger of defending democracy on those grounds is that they're not true. ... I find that they're not true without looking further than myself. I don't deserve a share in governing a hen-roost, much less a nation. Nor do most people – all...[those] who believe advertisements, and think in catchwords and spread rumors.

The reason for democracy is just the reverse. Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows.” (CS Lewis, as quoted in Wallis, 127-8)

Reinhold Niebuhr, Lewis' American counterpart, wrote at about the same time, “Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” (R. Niebuhr, as quoted in Wallis, 128)

CONCLUSION

(*Close with the rest of Will Jones' story, the white supremacy that reared its ugly head, and Will's legacy of positive influence characterized by “...racial reconciliation; the importance of showing hospitality across traditional boundaries of race, national origin, and power dynamics; and the value of servant leadership” (Wallis, 120)*).

Will Jones' courageous living out of Jesus' Kingdom values resulted in not only a transformed community that came to a deeper and more Christlike understanding of itself, but in a Bethany College enrollment increase of 24% in the two years following his first “convocation foot washing” (Wallis, 122).

In the world's way of reckoning, power is wielded like a club and for its own perpetuation. Jesus says, “Not so with you; rather, the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.”

Let us pray...