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Power

Lessons in Leadership

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

This worship explores the complex theme of power by highlighting unconventional biblical leaders who bravely used their influence to defy oppression and champion truth.

Recognizing that power itself is simply a tool, the service will challenge us to examine how we wield our own influence and confess where we fall short. Through focused prayers, hymns, and storytelling, we will come together to seek the wisdom and humility to use our power faithfully for God's purposes.

REFERENCES

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Psalm 124

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus text: Exodus 1:8-2:10, Matthew 16:13-20

We have two texts this week about power. Okay, they are about a lot of things, granted. But a central issue is power—power and identity. In Exodus, we find a ruler who governed out of fear and threats, but was thwarted by the powerless who knew who they were. Matthew and Jesus ask, “Who do you say that I am?”

How do we understand power for leadership? Is it the ability for the leader to do what he wants to do? “Throw them in the river” (Exodus 1:22). It seems incomprehensible that a leader would be so afraid of immigrants that he would recommend throwing them in the river. This was a general edict. Did you notice that? He told all his people, whenever you see a Hebrew baby boy, throw him in the river. Appealing to mob action, he inflamed prejudice and suspicion, stirring up the populace with fear-mongering and threats.

But let the girls live. Why was that? Let the girls live because they couldn’t do much? Because no one worries about girls? Because, well, they are girls. Isn’t that enough? No one can be so mean as to kill baby girls, could they?

I doubt that sentiment was what caused Pharaoh to spare the girls. He probably didn’t think they were capable of causing him trouble. That means he wasn’t paying attention, because two women got in the way of his first plan, and two women, one from his own household, caused his ultimate downfall.

Pharaoh was just off base from the beginning. He wanted to turn the river, a source of life, into a place of death, and his plan didn’t work. He wanted the women, the midwives who are bringers of life, to be instruments of death, and it didn’t work. The little girls he didn’t think were worth his consideration stood sentinel over a baby in a basket, floating on the river of life, a river of hope.

Now, this doesn’t mean that what God intends for good, human beings can’t turn to evil. Oh, how we wish that were true. But it does mean that if those who fear God, as Shiphrah and Puah did (and no, it doesn’t mean they were more afraid of what God would do to them than what Pharaoh would do to them. In fact, it means that they trusted in God’s power and presence more than in Pharaoh’s power and presence) can work to foil those who would misuse the blessings of God, if they are willing to take the risk; if they are willing to work for life and not for death.

I always thought the song “Down by the Riverside” was about stopping work. But now I wonder if it is about changing the kind of work you choose to do. Maybe “gonna lay down my sword and shield” and “gonna put on my long white robe” are not about being in heaven, but about choosing to do the work of life, not death; about choosing to fear God, not Pharaoh.

“Who was that masked man?” I’m showing my age again. That quote is from the old television show The Lone Ranger that I watched as a very small child – emphasis on the very. But you know the script: a town/farmer/person was in trouble from bad dudes of various types. The hero rides

into the situation, saves them, and then rides out on a rearing horse into the sunset (with a hearty “Hi-yo, Silver, away!”). The rescued would be left to wonder, “Who was that masked man?”

Because he wore such a clever mask, no one could figure out who he was. [Comic book geek alert: it never ceases to amaze me how unobservant people are in comic books. Put on a pair of glasses and comb your hair, and no one will recognize that you are Superman.] The whole secret-identity thing has been called into question in modern-day comics. What was the point? Why didn’t the heroes want people to know who they were? Some argue that it was to protect the friends and family of the vigilante. Enemies would get at the invulnerable one by attacking the loved ones. If you can’t get the body, attack the heart.

Maybe that is why Jesus ended this passage with that cryptic quote: “Don’t tell anyone who I really am.” You think? Maybe he was just looking out for us. He knew his followers were going to have a difficult time, so maybe he was saying, “Don’t let anyone know. Keep yourself safe. Enemies are everywhere.” Hmm, I wonder.

The event in the gospel text seems to be an important moment in Jesus’ teaching ministry. The importance is attested by the repetition of this event in three of the four gospels. Something significant is going on here, but what is it exactly?

Our first question must be, “Who is this about? Is it about Jesus, or is it about the disciples?” Matthew seems to come down on the side of the latter. His expansion of the conversation between Jesus and Peter indicates that, for Matthew at least, this was a teaching moment for the disciples and for us. It was not the moment for declaring to the world who Jesus really is; it was an insider moment, a called-out community moment.

What is significant about this passage (or one significant thing anyway) is that this is one of only two uses of the word church in the gospels. The other is two chapters later in Matthew, when Jesus tells us of the reconciliation purpose of the church. So, we need to listen closely to hear what is being said.

This is a passage about identity. It is, first of all, about the identity of Jesus. Who was he? Who is he? Peter got it right. Jesus says so. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Theologically, he is declaring that Jesus is the one we have been looking for, the one we need, whether we are aware of that need or not. “You are the Messiah.” This Messiah, the one we need, is the one who comes from God—is of one essence with God—the Son of the living God. Peter declares, whether he realizes it or not, that Jesus is the one who connects, who brings together human need and

divine presence. Jesus is the one who reconciles, who puts us in our brokenness back in touch with God's wholeness.

But it can't be just about the identity of Jesus. Or better, because of the identity of Jesus, our identity is transformed. We are no longer just individual followers; we have been called into a new community of faith under the lordship of Christ. We are different because of the claim that Christ is Lord. Our identity is wrapped up in the person of Christ.

And who have we become? What is the nature of the church that Jesus identifies? He gives us hints in his conversation with Peter that afternoon near Caesarea Philippi. First, acceptance of Christ is transformative. You are Peter, says Jesus; you are new, different; you have a purpose in the community of faith.

As an aside, some scholars wonder whether this is the place where Simon came to be called Peter. There is no evidence that the word "petros" was used as a name before this historical figure. But then, within the passage itself, Simon is identified as Simon Peter. even before Jesus declares him so. This might be a case of using the name he was best known by, even though it is not historically accurate. Or it might be that it was a nickname, or even a name of derision— Simon the blockhead, dumb as a box of rocks, or something like that. Then Jesus takes what was once a title of derision and turns it into a name of honor: "You are Peter, the rock upon which I will build my church."

The identifier of those who belong to Christ is that they are willing to be foundational; they are willing to be built upon. Paul speaks of Christ as the cornerstone, but Matthew says Peter (and, I believe, by extension, all of us) is the foundation material. Christ is the builder; we are the materials; we are the ones who give shape, like the foundation gives shape, to the building that is the church. It all rests upon us.

Next is the promise: "The gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (16:18)—it being the church; it being the community of which we are foundational; it being all we are called to be and all we long to be; it being the body. Hades was seen as the realm of the dead. That means it will not end. All things have a lifespan, we have come to believe. Things, institutions, lifestyles, and civilizations rise and fall. But the church—not necessarily any denomination or human manifestation— will survive into eternity. That is the promise. That means we can be bold as we seek to give shape to the church, to be foundational. We can take risks because we can't kill it! That's pretty amazing when you think of it. Why should we fear failure when Christ tells us that the church will endure?

It also means that the attack from the forces of darkness—the gates of Hades being the conduit from that world to this—will not succeed either. We need not live in fear of any attack, demonic or human. We are stronger than we realize.

Finally, we have the keys and the binding and loosing (16:19). What is that all about? Was Jesus establishing the hierarchical system that would become the Roman Catholic Church? Does he offer Peter the ability to determine who is in and who is out? Is it now the church's job to determine worthiness for eternity? Entry into heaven? Do we indeed hold the keys to entrance into the kingdom of God?

Some have argued so. The church has taken on the task of being the arbiter of salvation and has been all too willing to withhold entry into the community from those who don't measure up to an uncomfortable ideal that we are ready to declare. Surely, it is the church's responsibility to make this determination. Or is it?

What are the keys that Jesus hands over to Peter? What is the power that now resides in our hands? What was it about Peter's recognition of Jesus as Messiah in this passage? Knowledge; not just any knowledge, but the knowledge of the identity of the Christ. The key to the kingdom that was handed to Peter and is now ours is just that—the knowledge of who Jesus is. We are called to teach and to interpret. Binding and loosing is a descriptive way of talking about Bible study. We are to interpret the scriptures so that they become intelligible to a new world. We are to inform, to share, to teach about who is the answer to our prayers, the desire of all our hearts, and the fulfillment of all our needs.

We are called to share the identity of Christ with the world, so that they, too, can become part of the called-out community, the church. We welcome, we invite, we encourage, we instruct. And verse 20 is, I think, an action plan.

“Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” There are all sorts of biblical and theological interpretations of this verse, many of which are compelling arguments for the drama of the Christ event. But for our purposes, there is only one that makes sense to me. We say that this was a timed command that is no longer in force. It was for the first hearers for specific reasons that no longer apply. Or it reminds us how to evangelize.

Evangelism begins with conversation. It begins, many argue, with listening. We can no longer, if we ever could, argue folks into belief in or acceptance of Christ by relying on the authority of scriptures or doctrinal statements. “The Bible says” carries no weight in our world. Beginning with

“Jesus Christ is Lord, the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it” sounds to most folks like nonsense, bumper-sticker rhetoric. It isn’t convincing.

So, what is convincing? Jesus says, “Don’t tell anyone I am the Messiah.” Perhaps he meant that we are to show people that he is the Messiah. Folks no longer want to know what we believe; they want to know how we live. Does our belief in Jesus make any difference to us, besides how we spend some time on Sunday mornings?

In other words, Jesus wants us to show and then tell, to be the community at work in the world; then, we respond to the inevitable questions (“Why are you doing what you do? Why do you care about me so much? How can you be so loving?”) with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We don’t lead with doctrine; we end with it.

Who was that masked man? Maybe it was you. Maybe it was the Christ who lives within you. Go and rescue those in distress.

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