

Christ the King Sunday November 20 2022

Luke 23:33-43

I have been thinking about power this week. On Wednesday, I asked for definitions of someone who is powerful. How would you define or talk about powerful people? I got answers like those with a lot of money. Which could give them influence. With a lot of money, you could buy Twitter and do what you want with it! Twitter has power, influence. 396 million worldwide users. Yes!? The definitions supplied were powerful people are those with political or popular pull. Someone who had prestige or control.

Ultimately, I think our popular conceptions of power come down to force. Power is the ability- through violence, coercion, money- to make something happen. To make someone do something they don't want to do. We have a visceral sense of what that means when we talk about power rankings in football. You are ranked higher because you can push around the other guys more easily. Powerful countries tend to be labeled as those with the largest military or economic leverage.

We see in our story from Luke today both individual and systemic power being flexed. Powerful people put Jesus on that cross to protect both their own power and the power of the system they operate in.

King Herod- the ostensible ruler of Judea but who held that post only because he bowed to the Romans. He put Jesus on the cross to protect his own authority both from the Romans picking someone else to rule but also his personal and familial power. Pilate, the Roman Governor, puts Jesus on the cross to preserve

peace and placate the mob. An individual sacrificed for the good of the power of the system.

But this understanding of power goes even further down the totem pole. Those under the rule of Herod and Pilate who also had some authority. In this case it is the religious leaders who felt like Jesus was threatening their power, so they used that power and influence to turn the crowds, who had been cheering Jesus as he entered into Jerusalem, against him. They used the power of the system established by Herod and the Romans to influence them to act to kill Jesus. Spread lies about him on Twitter and sought to stir them up to crucify Jesus and release Barabbas instead. So, Jesus winds up on the cross.

The leaders then come to the cross and show their power over Jesus by scoffing at him. You can't be the chosen one of God. If you were... if you were the messiah, this descendant of the great King David. Then you would prove it by force, by coming down from the cross. Show that power and save yourself from this mess- from suffering, injustice, humiliation, death.

And that view extends all the way down through the system that brought Jesus to the cross. The soldiers who do not themselves have much power in this system, never-the-less brutalize Jesus with their words and actions. Mocking him for their own sport- an exercise of power that comes because this is the only way they can feel powerful. Mocking him to make fun of him, to make a point, to embarrass him, to exert power over him. That they can make themselves feel better by belittling another human being. Because brutality and force are the system they know. That's how you show power.

Even the evil-doer hanging on a cross beside Jesus knows only this kind of power. He also derides him, mocks him. If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us! Use that power, flex those muscles to come down from the cross- and take us with you! For this, power exerted through force, this alone can save.

There is only one person who gets what's going on. The other evil-doer. The other criminal. He is what we Lutherans like to call a theologian of the cross. Ironical as he's on one. He calls a thing what it is. He sees clearly the truth both of himself and of Jesus.

He turns to his fellow evil-doer and asks him "Hey, do you not fear God? We're all hanging up here. We're all going to die. You and I are getting what we deserve, but this guy, Jesus, is innocent."

This man is innocent- the system has killed him because he is bold enough to say it is unjust, that it is not the be all and end all, that there is a power greater than that of human violence and force- and that is the agape love of God. That there is a wisdom greater than human wisdom, and that is the apparent foolishness of God that has come to earth in the person of Jesus.

We are the evil-doers on the cross. We have within us that same question- hey dude! Save yourself and us! Use your power to remove this suffering and death around us. Suffering and death we have caused through our actions, but also through the systems we as humans have established. The definitions of power we have accepted as true. Definitions that have led to war, famine, disease. To mistrust and abuse.

And, at our best, we are the one who gets it. Do you not have the awe of God within you? We are justly condemned. We deserve to die, but this one does not. He is innocent. He did nothing wrong. And it is this enlightened evil-doer who asks of Jesus- remember me when you come into your kingdom. It is pure request, just to be remembered. And Jesus does what Jesus always does- gives so much more. Oh friend, today you will be with me in paradise. I won't just remember you. You're coming with me. And it isn't going to be what this guy thinks it is.

The reign of God and power of God is not at all the way in which we define power. The cross is the throne of Christ. That is where he shows his true kingship. It looks foolish to us. It looks like losing to us. What a big loser and what could be worse than that in our system?

What Christ shows is what true power is. "Father, forgive them they do not know what they are doing. Not just to me (Jesus) but to themselves." Because our understanding, or better said mis-understanding, of power hurts not just those upon whom it is exercised, but also rebounds back on those who exert it. Because to do that well you need to ultimately deny the humanity of those upon whom you exert it. Ask those who have gone to war, who have had to kill fellow human beings time and again how they have had to think to be able to do that. And still they are scarred. Listen to the language we have begun to use in our political discourse. Language that denies the humanity of our political opponents, that others them, turns them into something less than us so that we can exercise power over them. Dominate them. Own them. Mock them. And tell me again how this brings life fuller and more abundant?

I love this text for Christ the King Sunday because it flips our expectations of what a king is. Of what power is. What would it look like if we sought the power that resides in Jesus? If we turned up our nose at what passes for power in our world. And we struggled and prayed for and pursued what power looks like in the reign of God. Or even if we could just do what that one evil doer did, who recognizes his own truth “I’m getting what I deserve. I’m a sinner.” Whose only cry to Jesus is, remember me.

And what does he get?

Not just, yep, I’ll think of you but... you’re coming with. This is what God in Jesus Christ does for us through the waters of baptism- I’m not going to leave you hanging on this cross, you’re coming with me. That’s the power of God. Power to bring life! Not death. To reach down to us and drag us out of certain death into life. Life fuller and more abundant.

To give us in Jesus Christ a peace so deep, waters so still, that regardless of the storm around you (and there will still be storms) they cannot touch you. Because you are anchored in water so deep nothing can move you. You are so centered and whole that nothing can pull you apart. Not all the things you think you got to do and why do you have to do them anyway? Because you will get money, power, influence. What happens if you let go of that? Not that you don’t do, life is lived after all, but what if we let go of that? That idea of power. What would life be like?

Remember what Mary sang a year ago as we entered into our journey with the Gospel of Luke? Her Magnificat about what Jesus was coming to do? “You have cast the mighty down from their thrones and uplifted the humble of heart. You

have filled the hungry with wondrous things and left the wealthy no part.” Jesus has come to turn everything upside down. To overturn the way we think that life works. Mary says, Luke says, Jesus has come to show us that what we think is power is not power at all but weakness and brings nothing but death. He has come to free us from those things that bind us. “Father forgive them they know not what they are doing. They think they have it figured out, they think they have me on the cross and are killing me, but they’re the ones who are dying. And the only way to life is through me.” That’s the way that Luke has been trying to drill into our heads the last 365 days. And Jesus will not force you to that understanding, demand that, legislate that. Because that is not exercising true power.

True power is what Jesus shows. A love that meets everyone where they are. That sits at table with Pharisees and sinners. That physically touches rulers and lepers. That reveals all the imperfections in our lives, the messiness, and says – I love you, you are mine, come and follow me.

A love that will die so that another might live. A love so great, that it will do anything for even an ungrateful, ignorant, spiteful child. Like me. Like us.

The cross is the power of our king. Unconditional love is the power of the reign of God. Food for all, shelter for all, clothing for all is the system he brings. The water of baptism is the claim this God has on us. One extended to Soren Ivers today as God’s love for him in Jesus Christ reaches down into those waters to pull him from death to life. The meal of Christ’s own body and blood is what binds us more and more into that reign of God. Jesus’ own self given as our food. The community of folks who get it crowded around the table crying, “Jesus, remember

me- a sinner- when you come into your kingdom” This is powerful. It does something. Because it recognizes that true power resides not in us. But in the one who created all. Who loves all of that creation. And who will do anything to restore it.

True power resides in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob- who spoke the world into being and spun the universe into motion. And who came to us in Jesus, God’s own Son, come down to us in a form we can see, taste, touch smell. To love us from death into life. Who comes to us still in water, bread, wine, Word spoken and read. Who joins us on our crosses and says, “This isn’t the end, today, you will be with me in the paradise of my reign.” Thanks be to God.