

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Vocabulary of Faith: Power
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1 Kings 12:1-11; Matthew 20:20-28

He had a decision to make. Which way would he go? To understand Rehoboam's decision tree, let's take a quick look at our morning's story. Rehoboam had been named king at the death of his father Solomon (who was not as wise as people make him out to be and was an incredibly brutal monarch). Following Rehoboam's coronation, a delegation from the ten northern tribes of Israel came to him with a proposition. If he was nicer to them than his father had been, which would not have been difficult, they would be happy to be his subjects. Rehoboam, not sure what to do, asked them to come back in three days. To facilitate his decision, the king went to his older, wiser advisors. He asked them what he ought to do. Their answer was to agree to all the terms and conditions offered by the tribes. Not really liking that advice, the king went to the young men who had grown up with him in the palace in places of power and privilege. Their advice was to threaten the northern tribes with even worse treatment than his father had imposed. So, which would he choose? The answer unfortunately seems too obvious. He chose the latter...the way of absolute power. It proved again Edward Abbey's comment that *"Power is always dangerous. Power attracts the worst and corrupts the best."* Oh, and the result of his choice? It was violence, civil war and the destruction of the kingdom.

While we might want to criticize Rehoboam for this decision, my guess is that deep down inside all of us is a desire to run the zoo; to organize the world, the nation or our lives, exactly the way we think that it ought to be. Unfortunately, this desire for power, when it leads to real power usually leads to death rather than life; to diminishment rather than to empowerment. One of the great experiments dealing with power occurred at Stanford University in 1973. One of the psychology professors was tasked with determining why prison guards tended to abuse their prisoners. Was it the prisoners? Was it the conditions? Was it the guards? He was not sure, so he created an experiment in which he would have students act the parts of prisoners and guards. He recruited 24 mentally healthy students to participate. Half of them were prisoners and half were guards. The prisoners were rounded up from their homes and placed in prison cells that had been created on the campus. The experiment was supposed to last two weeks but was cancelled in the sixth day because the "guards" had become so abusive to the prisoners that the professor feared for the prisoner's mental health. One of the student guards later said he could not believe his own vicious actions. Again, *"Power is always dangerous. Power attracts the worst and corrupts the best."*

This understanding of power is on clear view in our Jesus' story this morning. Jesus was moving toward Jerusalem and what his followers believed was that there would be a consolidation of power over the Roman legions and their Jewish colleagues. Not wanting her sons to miss out on the most powerful positions, Jesus' aunt asked that her two sons, Jesus' cousins, be given the most prestigious and powerful positions in the new kingdom; the seats at Jesus right and left hand. This made sense because positions of power were almost always consolidated within families. Though Jesus tried to explain what those positions entailed, which they did not understand, he then made it clear they were not his to give. Needless to say, when the other ten heard that they might miss out on being power brokers in the new kingdom, they went ballistic and their anger toward the two brothers boiled over. They were not about to be left out of the positions of power. They wanted their opportunity to dominate not only the Romans but the corrupt Jewish administration in Jerusalem. It was in that moment that Jesus decided to give a two-lesson short course on power in the Kingdom of God.

The first lesson could be called, “Uh, Uh, not in my house you don’t.” If any of you ever came home and said or did something you learned elsewhere, which was not acceptable in your own home...and your parents said, “That is not acceptable in our house”, then you know what was happening here. These are Jesus’ words. *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you.”* Jesus wanted to make it clear that this new kingdom was not like the old kingdom; that the Kingdom of God was not the Kingdom of Rome. And because of that, the way one operated was going to be different. And I want to be clear here what I believe this means. Some people, including Luther, interpreted this to mean that lording it over and being tyrants was OK out in the secular world; the world of governments and military might be like this, but it was not acceptable in the church. This is what some people refer to as two kingdom theology. In other words, Christians can be brutal to others in the public square, just not in the church. This is not what Jesus is saying. He is saying it is never acceptable, whether in the church or in government or in families, for his followers to act like Romans and use power to get their own way while oppressing others. It is not acceptable because it destroys rather than gives life; it tears down rather than builds up. And God is about life and building up.

The second lesson could be called, “Now this is real power.” Originally, I was going to go straight to Jesus’ words, but I think we need to pause. We need to pause because the words I am about to read have become such throw away words that I believe that they have lost their power. What I want us to do is to rethink them even before we hear them. Let me ask, how many of you have ever been in an airport? Used a restroom in an airport? Noticed the person cleaning up the restrooms? OK, keep that person in mind as we read Jesus’ words. *“Whoever wishes to be great among you must be the person who cleans the toilets in the airport. And whoever wishes to be first among you must be the one who cleans them forever without pay.”* I say this because Jesus’ words about being servants and slaves would have hit his disciples in the gut, because his followers had servants and slaves. And the thought of having to trade places with those servants and slaves would have been unthinkable. Thus, when Jesus tells them that greatness and real power comes in serving others, it would have blown their minds. He would have been calling for them to radically rethink all their relationships, both with each other and with the world. And in so doing they would have discovered that service is real power because it lifts people up and helps them to understand that they are valued by God and others.

One of the great sins of the church is that we have either forgotten or ignored these words from Jesus. And that decision is what has led to the ongoing sexual abuse scandals in not only the Roman church but far too many protestant and independent churches as well; because that kind of abuse is not about sex but about power. It has led good church going folk to seek power in politics and to forget that they are to be servants and not overlords. It has led to tens of thousands of women and children fleeing their homes because of abuse, some of the abuse even sanctioned by clergy. We have forgotten that this kind of power leads to diminishment rather than the empowerment of the image of God in others. What should we do then? The answer to this comes in a practice I will give you this morning. First look around you at the people sitting close to you. Now turn to them and say, “What can I do for you?” That’s right, turn and simply say, “What can I do for you?” See it isn’t that hard to say...and it isn’t that hard to do. But in so doing we become servants. We become those who, like Christ, serve others and in so doing help transform people and communities and the world into the realities that God desires them to be. That then is my challenge is that wherever you are this week, to look for opportunities to ask others, “What can I do for you” that you might help to transform the world.