

Lent 2C - 2/28/07

Gen 15:1-18; Phil 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

"The Temptation to Power" Rev. Seth D. Jones

The Christian faith only works when it is in the middle of the messy, strange and awkward relationships of human beings. While the faith is filled with ideals and the striving toward them on our parts, the faith of the Christian, in and of itself, is not an ideal. It is a way, a guide and a foundation for life itself. Faith is defined, refined and designed in its confrontation with all the difficulties of daily life.

Last week, we spoke of how we are tempted away from God's provision, power and protection. This week, our readings lift up aspects of power and what Christ does with it. We saw how our power comes from doing what Christ did, namely allowing ourselves to be subject to a life of the Cross. Today, we will take a deeper look at the nature of power and the temptation to power.

Last week, I said we like to hang around power. We seek it out. We want to be near it, and we often don't distinguish the forms of power we want to be around. As long as it is power, or they are powerful, we will gravitate toward it. In fact, where the power lies is a constant human concern, if not THE concern in our relationships with one another, with groups of people and with organizations. We get weird about power and who has it. We want to be on the "right" side of power, be on the winning team, as it were.

But Jesus makes things very confusing for us. The power Jesus expresses and uses doesn't look like the power we like to be around. Jesus doesn't seem to care about normal human power relationships and dynamics. He is constantly undermining, reversing and overturning the common understandings of power in his day. I would submit Jesus is still doing the same thing in our day and age. In our reading today, Jesus seems to have no concern for the concerns of the Pharisees, who are the dominant religious authorities of the day. He has even less concern for the concerns of the Roman Empire, the dominant political authorities of the day. Jesus puts himself right in the middle of all these competing power dynamics and walks resolutely through the center of them, proclaiming an entirely different approach and understanding of power, an approach which confirms and fulfills the promises of God.

Power always comes with a partner and that partner is control. If you want to understand how relationships are playing out in a dysfunctional corporation, government, church or family, look for who is trying to control the powers that be and wait for the reaction. Or look for how the powers that be are trying to control the people they are trying to have power over. What you see can be very instructive. Today, the Pharisees and Herod are attempting to control outcomes based on the power they hold. From Herod's perspective, Jesus is a man who is mocking the entire empire. He claims to be God, which is what the Emperor of Rome claims for himself. Any challenge to that claim from any region of the Empire is high rebellion and heresy, punishable by death. From the Pharisee's perspective, a dead Jesus at this moment meant having to head up a rebellion against the Roman army with Jesus' rag-tag group of illiterate fishermen, poor and unwashed homeless, former lepers and healed sick, tax-collectors and God only knows who else, or the Pharisees would have to be the agents of control who put down the rebellion. Either way, the Pharisees lose their power and influence.

To be clear, Luke does not portray the Pharisees in a necessarily bad light. They are simply blind participants in a much larger power dynamic. "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34) Jesus will say of Roman authority and Pharisee alike from the agony of the Cross. This is because Jesus' citizenship is not of this world. It is of heaven. Paul tells us this is the citizenship we all share as followers of Christ - the citizenship of heaven.

I frame all of this to show that power is subtle and difficult to discern and to disentangle. We cannot deal with the temptation to power by simply refusing and denying what is central to human relationships. Power is. The challenge in the temptation to power is where we see the foundation of that power.

Let me give you two examples of what I mean by power in human relationships.

The first example is shrouded in the deep mystery of family stories and involves a particularly harsh individual who considered herself to be a great power in the community and especially in her church. This was back in the 1940s and in a little town in upstate New Jersey. At every opportunity she sought to exert her sense of power to influence and control outcomes. Family marriages, who was "in" and who was "out" in the family relationships, which minister was best for the church, who should serve on boards and who shouldn't. She was the matriarch, and if you did not cooperate with her vision, so help you. The children's minister at her Presbyterian church had been there for many years when she started attending regularly. He was well-dressed, single and much loved by the congregation. His past was known to some in the church, but he was a child of God and knew forgiveness from above and from those around him. This woman found out about his past. Within

a year, she managed to get herself onto the personnel board in the church. She made the children's minister's past public knowledge. She gathered together a small but vocal core of about 12 people who made a lot of noise at council meetings. Within 6 months, she had exerted enough of her power and control to remove this man from the children he had taught and from the congregation who loved him. She used her power to control and produce the outcome she wanted. Now that she had power and power over, she formed this Presbyterian church into her church and eventually everyone bowed to her version of all things. The church did not grow. New people were not welcomed. She was in charge and power was hers.

When we speak of power in human relationships, this is the kind of power Jesus opposes. I use an obvious and extreme example above. People who are very good at wielding power are much more insidious and tactful in maneuvering people and brokers of power than this woman was. The power this woman exerted was the power of coercive influence. It was the power of control. I am not sure what the people in her church thought of all this background maneuvering and power plays, but my guess is, like the Pharisees and the Roman Empire, looking from the inside of the realm of power everything looked normal, like it always is. It takes someone like Jesus to cut things down the middle and confront us with the structure we unknowingly submit to and the promise we are supposed to be living out of.

The second example is the Stuart family of Chicago, Illinois and points near and far. They are the positive example of power well used, which is why I am using their name. When you think of American corporate and political power and influence, the Stuart family would be hovering in the background. At the center of the family is Robert Stuart. Robert was the CEO of Quaker Oats. He is the person responsible for turning the company into a multi-billion dollar company. When he retired, he was appointed Ambassador to Norway by President Reagan. The family has a far reach. Family members work with and for the Rockefellers. They have kids who are married into the Pillsbury dynasty. One of the relatives runs International Harvester. Famous people would fly out to visit them at their ranch. The Stuart family is very connected at very high levels.

Everything I have just told you, I found out by listening carefully to people in town. No one in the family told me the things I just told you. When Kate, RJ and I went to their ranch outside Cooke City for dinner, the whole Stuart clan was there for their annual summer get-together, which lasted about a month and at any given time comprised about 15 people or more. From youngest to oldest, everyone liked everyone else. They enjoyed being together. Never in a million years would I have known I was associating with that level of high society.

One of the daughters, Margaret, got stuck in a blizzard on the Beartooth Pass while on a date. Within hours, her name was plastered on newscasts around the nation. It was front-page news in Montana. This was in 1934, so the Beartooth Pass was still a dirt road with no guard-rails or barriers. Rescuers were sent out to search the Pass, which is a monumental task in a snowstorm. At the top, 6 feet of snow can fall in 6 hours. I saw the newspaper article about the experience. But Margaret could have cared less about the media attention. The media attention was just part of a much more touching story about how she and her husband met. It was that snowstorm and experience which convinced her this was the man she was going to marry. Her status and the attention it drew were meaningless relative to the love story between Margaret and her husband.

The Stuart family did not take advantage of the power they held. They would give gifts to the town and to the church, often under the condition of anonymity. All of them served on charitable organizations and volunteered their time and energy to help others. There was no thought about whether to do it or not. The power the Stuart family, as I knew them, wielded was not in the influence they had, which was substantial. The power the Stuart family exerted was in their capacity to *serve*. Even though they held power, the Stuart family seemed to seek ways to level power differences and to raise up those who did not have power.

The temptation to power, then, is not whether or not we have power. We all do, on some level. Rather it is what we do with it. Remember all spiritual temptations are countered by a promise of God. In our Old Testament reading today, we see God confirming his promise to Abraham. Abraham has been promised descendants as many as the stars in the sky and grains of sand on the beach, and yet at the twilight of his life, there is nothing to even remotely suggest such a thing. Abraham is no small bit player in the land flowing with milk and honey. He is a wealthy, wealthy man. He has servants and livestock and land. He is wise and revered as an elder. And yet his inheritance will go to a slave born in his house. Clearly, Abraham is a man who can control outcomes and wield his power to get what he wants, but the promise of a legacy eludes him.

Because it is not in his power. But it is in God's power. So Abraham, at the Lord's request, makes a sacrifice. God confirms God's covenant with Abraham by walking down the middle of the divided sacrifice, which is the ancient way of closing a covenant with others. When humans do it, though, both of them walk down the middle together. When God does it, the covenant is made, confirmed and completed by God and God alone. Sacrifice, then, becomes how we show our willingness to accept the promises of God. Abraham acts completely on faith. He makes the sacrifice and God makes the promise. It is finished.

Paul tells us our citizenship lies in heaven, not with the powers that be here on earth, because he wants us to know the source of power and the kind of power we are dealing with. The power of God is the power Christ gives up to become like us (Phil 2:5-11). And it is precisely this kind of power, the power to serve, the power to commit to the Cross, the power to sacrifice, which transforms us from our humble bodies into the body of Christ's glory. And it is this power which Christ uses to make all things subject to himself (Phil 3:21). In other words, the only way to have the power of transformation, the only way to participate in the power of Christ, is to submit to the power of God. And this is always a huge sacrifice on our parts.

Conforming to God's power may mean we have to let go of our desire for outcomes we would like to see. It will definitely mean giving up our ability to control our destinies and our future. It will mean giving up the desire to influence others for the sake of my personal needs. It will mean that we will have to empty ourselves of all the things which make us into gods in our own minds. The temptation to power is to take on the power which belongs to God and God alone. The letting go of that power means we see the power of God in action in our own lives. Our sacrifice of our own power is our willingness to accept the promises of God, the God who tells Abraham, the father of the faith, the righteousness of which was accorded to him by God, "I am your shield. Do not be afraid." Amen.