

Power Lessons

A sermon by John Strommen on John 19:1-16a March 18, 2018

It's been famously written that the story of Jesus, including the passion narrative, is simply "the greatest story ever told." The ultimate story of good vs. evil. But think of how strange this story is! As favorite stories go, we have a fairly customary situation where the bad guys have the "good guy," Jesus, on the ropes. How is this story supposed to go from this point on? We all know, don't we? We know the stories, watch the movies, TV shows – from westerns to cop shows to Star Wars to Avengers, and so on. The bad guy doesn't win. Nobody wants to see that. The good guy wins because at some point, the good guy *fights back*, he has reinforcements that show up, he has a previously hidden source of strength or power. In the vast majority of stories that interest us, the good guy turns the tables on the bad guys and exacts revenge. He uses raw power to win!

In our world, we have a hard time even conceiving of a victory without the exercise of raw power and getting revenge for wrongs done to you.

And yet, here we have Jesus, the Son of God, who lets himself be bullied, mocked, tortured, finally killed...without putting up a fight. This is the greatest story ever told?

Well, some will say, not right away, but after the resurrection he gets revenge and turns the tables on the bad guys! How so? Does he lead an army against Rome? Does he orchestrate a campaign to have all the Jewish authorities removed from office? Does he condemn everyone in the crowd to eternal damnation? No, Jesus turns the tables on his tormentors and executioners by...offering forgiveness and eternal life to them. Remember one of Jesus' seven last words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Not exactly revenge, is it?

You see, in the Gospel of John, sin is quite simple: failing to see that Jesus is *from* God and *for* us. Even the worst of us.

But doesn't Jesus take on sin, death and the devil and *defeat them*? Yes, but not by blunt force, but by using his power in a different way. Normally, in this world, power is seen as a tool to get people to do things your way or as a weapon for your tribe to use against the other tribe. We understand power largely in coercive terms.

God didn't come to this earth in Jesus of Nazareth to exact revenge on humans for their rebellion and destroy them, but rather to give them – us – life. Even those who condemned him to death. All of us. And so, Jesus "revenge" of forgiveness was followed by the revenge of giving of God's Holy Spirit to people – even people who cried "crucify him!" Even people who persecuted Jesus. Look at Saul. God's revenge on the human race is to literally empower them with the power of God to be life-givers, equippers, *empower-ers themselves* in the world. After Easter, we will explore the many ways we are all empowered to be life-givers in our world and in our church. The experience is called GPS: Finding direction in your faith Journey. I hope you will be a part of it.

As an aside, the movie Black Panther, that is setting box office records, is doing it while holding forth on a debate about this very thing. In the movie, there are three options the fictional people of Wakanda wrestle with in their deliberations about power. Should a people who has a valuable resource – and much power – use that resource to a) further their interests only in a gated community kind of way, or b) seek to dominate others in the world as revenge for historical injustices, or c) help other people in other countries improve their lives.

For Pontius Pilate, his power, as an extension of the Roman Empire, was clearly a tool for domination. Not as revenge for injustices, but simply because they could. Pilate assumes in his encounter with Jesus, that he, Pilate, has this kind of coercive power - the kind of power that can decide whether a man lives or dies. So at one point, as he's trying to figure out what to do with Jesus, Pilate says to him, *"Don't you know that I have the power to release you or to crucify you?"*

Jesus is not impressed. He says in response, *"You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from beyond."* Power is always a spiritual matter, no matter how it is exercised. It is bestowed from above, the capacity to impact another person's life. The question is: how will you use the power that has been given to you by God? Whether you are Pontius Pilate, a school teacher, a student, a parent, a tech engineer or whatever, you have power. And that power is always spiritual. Will your power be used to help the lives around you to flourish, or will your power be used to control and diminish the lives of those around you? This is always the question of those who are called in this world to join God in God's work in the world.

Pilate used his power to protect himself and his political future from the threats the Jewish leaders were making. It says he became very afraid during the trial. This is not because he was afraid of Jesus or the Jewish leaders. He was not. He became afraid that his political future would be damaged if he didn't act decisively, so Pilate chose political expediency over justice and innocence. Why take the chance that Jesus could empower his people? Often power is wielded in such a way that it takes power away from others, makes them weaker. This is what the Romans did with the Jews. This world all too often wields power as force to control and instrumentalize others – to use them - to accomplish one's own purposes, to impose one's will on others.

Do you see this kind of power around you? In whom? When do you see it in yourself?

On the other hand, Jesus used his power to heal those who were broken, to forgive those who were burdened, to restore life to those who were without hope. He used his power to *empower* others, to make them stronger, in order to be witnesses to God's promised kingdom.

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Jesus came to this earth because this world is in the grips of the first kind of power, power that controls and binds people for the sake of someone's agenda. We all live in that world, we're diminished by it, and we wield it. And this kind of power will destroy us. Jesus comes to us as the king of an alternative kingdom, where power is wielded for life-giving purposes only. When Pilate interrogates Jesus, he is blind to who Jesus is and what kind of power he has, so he mocks Jesus and the Jews. He is unaware

who the true king is and what real power is. For instance, during Pilate's interrogation of Jesus, Pilate chooses to mock the Jewish leaders by parading Jesus around as a king, dressed in purple with a crown of thorns, calling him "King of the Jews." This is meant to insult the Jewish leaders, who are lobbying heavily for Jesus' death. To Pilate, the idea that this harmless guy named Jesus is really a king is absurd, you see, so he's rubbing the Jewish leaders' noses in it!

But the clincher is after Pilate has sentenced Jesus to crucifixion, when Pilate presents Jesus to the Jewish leaders by sitting Jesus on the Judge's Bench at the Stone Pavement. Now, the Judge's Bench is reserved normally only for a real judge with real power. Again, this is all mockery, as Pilate clearly despises the Jews. But, irony of ironies, Jesus is not the one being judged, but Pilate, the Jews, and the world are being judged. What is meant as mockery in parading Jesus as a king is in fact true. He is king. And Jesus is not really the one on trial; rather, it is Pilate, the Jewish leaders and the world who are on trial. Their failure to recognize Jesus for who he is - the Word made flesh, the giver of life, the one sent from God - brings judgment upon themselves.

Jesus won not by using power to destroy and coerce and exact revenge, but by rising from the dead, and spreading life, hope, healing and forgiveness. Jesus is king, but his kingship is as a shepherd, not warrior. He lays down his life for his flock. That is what we see in the trial scene. The real king who is a shepherd.

Next month in the GPS course coming up, we will talk often about callings. Our first calling is simply to see Jesus for *who* he is, *recognize* his voice and *follow* him, as sheep to their shepherd. Second, we are called to use any power given to us from above to empower those around us, to give life, to encourage life, to restore hope. This calling can happen anytime, anywhere.

In God's kingdom, God is at work in, with and under us, partnering with us to co-create a more trustworthy and hopeful world. We have an opportunity to recognize that our very lives are workshops and laboratories for God's callings to us through the Holy Spirit. We will learn to recognize these callings right in the very places where we live our lives, through the story we call our own, tapping into the passions God has placed in our hearts, utilizing the gifts and personality God has given to us, and discovering that this faith community of which we are a part needs for each of us to find our sweet spot in the body of Christ.

The Jesus adorned with purple and a crown of thorns has shown us what real power is, and that is the kingdom we're called to live in. Amen.