

Text: John 19: 1-16
Title: Power on Trial
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I went to a wedding.

There was a bride in white and a minister in black.

There were bridesmaids and flowers.

There was a groom and groomsmen decked out in tuxedos with gangster fedoras and spats ~ a look that they may regret later.

The wedding was outside and we gathered around a gazebo. With no music and no meditation, it felt a bit like a drive-by, but vows were spoken, rings exchanged, and then the minister said, “By the power vested in me by the World Wide Web I know pronounce you...”

I hope no one heard me choke. It caught me completely by surprise. It pulled me up short. It turns out that the minister was a friend from a bar who got ordained through the internet.

Now, may God bless their union. I wish them nothing but a lifetime of love and happiness, but it did get me to wondering about power.

Where does power come from?

How is power vested?

Is there some power, reality, or authority beyond what we see?

Is there something bigger than the World Wide Web?

What is power?

For some power is in money, or muscle, or the military. For some power is at the end of a gun, or behind a badge, or located in an office. Power is political, spiritual, sexual, emotional, and economic. Power has to do with race and history and education and morality. Power is complicated and corrupting. You may not know what makes for power, but many of us know what it means to feel powerless....

Last week we framed our text as “Truth on Trial;” this morning I invite you to consider this text as “Power on Trial.” What is the power dynamic in this text? If Jesus is embodied truth, what is his claim to power? And, what does that say about power in our lives?

Let’s consider our text....

As John tells it, Judas guides a detachment of soldiers and representatives of the chief priests to the garden where Jesus was resting. They bind Jesus and take him to Caiaphas, who kicks him to Pilate, the regional Roman governor. When they arrive at Pilate’s palace the priests remain out on the porch, in order to avoid ceremonial uncleanness before the Passover. Therefore, Pilate shuttles between Jesus, who is brought inside the palace, and the chief priests who wait outside.

There is an initial exchange about who has power regarding Jesus.

The priests name Jesus as an “evil-doer” but claim that they don’t have the power to punish. Pilate has the power to punish but questions the validity of the charges. In fact, after talking with Jesus, Pilate goes outside to the priests and announces. “I find no basis for a charge against him.”

To appease the gathered Jewish leaders Pilate offers Barabbas, a robber, insurrectionist, or “man of violence.” (Pick your translation.) The crowd calls for Barabbas. As one writer puts it, they select “violence rather than nonviolence, the power-wielder rather than the peacemaker.”

When Mel Gibson cast this story on the silver screen he gloried in the gore. Jesus is whipped and pummeled until he is little more than a bloodied piece of meat. I think Gibson’s tact was that the suffering of Jesus would elicit in the viewer some sympathy, or guilt, or a sorrow that leads unto conversion. However, it strikes me that the gospels are short on details about the beating of Jesus. And, I am not minimizing the torture, but....

But, rather than detailing the flogging there is great attention given to the mocking of Jesus. In an honor/shame-based culture the humiliation of Jesus carries more power than the beating.

The soldiers twist a crown of thorns on Jesus’ head, drape a purple robe over his shoulders, and Pilate puts him on display in front of priests. Saying for the second time that he can find no basis for the charge that they brought against him.

Crucify! Crucify!

The priests point to a law which necessitates Jesus be put to death because he claimed to be the Son of God. That claim pulls Pilate up short. The text reads that he was already frightened. This news heightens that fear.

It could be that in an empire of emperor-worship, where the lines between humanity and deity were blurred, this claim bothered Pilate. It could be that the presence of Jesus unsettled him in such a way that he didn’t know how to proceed. Either way, he goes back into the palace to talk to Jesus...

Where do you come from?

Pilate doesn’t ask about the nature of Jesus or the claim of divinity, he asks about Jesus’ origin. And Jesus doesn’t say “a mumblin’ word.” Which gets under Pilate’s skin. He pulls rank. “Don’t you realize I have power to either free you or crucify you.”

I have power.

Well, not exactly. There are two words in Greek that get translated as “power.” One is *dunamis*, the other is *exousia*. Usually *dunamis* (think dynamite) gets rendered as “power.” And, usually *exousia* gets translated as “authority.” The word in our text is *exousia* (authority). I have no idea why they translated it as power....

I have authority.

Jesus counters that whatever authority Pilate has was given to him “from above.”

And, while we’re talking about the idiosyncrasies of translation, that phrase (from above) is a single word in Greek that shows up in a few other places in John’s gospel. For example, in John 3: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above.... (born again?)”

So, in some ways Jesus answers the question about from whence he came.

Over and over again John locates Jesus as having come “from above.” From the first verses of chapter one, to the claim that Jesus came from God and knows that way back to God, to this exchange John identifies Jesus as coming from above. And therefore, he locates whatever authority Pilate has as tangential, or referential, or derivative, or given by God “from above.”

And I think Pilate knows it.

Somehow, in front of Jesus, Pilate knows that his authority is all just a ruse.

Somehow, in front of Jesus, Pilate knows that he’s just playing make believe....

Because, in response, Pilate presses even harder to release Jesus.

Three times he says he can find no basis for the charges.

Three times he lays it at the feet of the high priests.

Three times he tries to wiggle out.

Until finally he takes Jesus out to the judgment seat. Think of the judgement seat as a cross between a throne and a judicial bench. Think of it as a symbol of power.

And here’s another twist!

Who sits on the judgement seat?

The words used to describe Pilate sitting on the judgement seat can also mean that he places Jesus on it. Imagine that high drama: at noon, when the Passover lamb would be slain, with Jesus bloodied and robed in purple, scourged but seated, in the place of power, powerless. One last mocking image. Power on trial. And Pilate cries out:

Here is your king!

The crowd responds, “Crucify!”

Pilate asks again, “Shall I crucify your king?”

And they cry back, “We have no king but Caesar.”

We have no king but Caesar....

Listen to how Bishop Lesslie Newbigin captures that moment:

....with an appalling abruptness, the trial ends. The central faith by which Israel lives – that Yahweh alone is Lord – has been publically denied by the official spokesmen of the nation (“We have no king but Caesar”). The central purpose for which the political

order exists – namely, to defend the good and punish the evildoer – has been publically abandoned by the representative of the imperial power.... The claims of religion and of statecraft to authority over human affairs have been unmasked. The “powers” have been disarmed. Only one claim remains, which can never be withdrawn: that Jesus, the slain lamb, is king. That is the gospel, the gospel of the kingdom of God.

Did you get that?

At the heart of this text the high priests forsake their faith and the state forfeits its authority. Whatever power they thought they had falls away and all that is left is the Lamb on the throne. Thanks be to God.

But, dear friends, what does all of this suggest about power or authority in our lives? At a time when truth and power are on trial what does it mean for us?

Let me offer one (decidedly odd) reflection.

If authority comes “from above,” from high above, from high above emperors and empires, from high above the exercise of violence and the spin of politics, then we live with all sorts of ruses. There are all sorts of power plays that, even while brutal and dehumanizing, come and go....

But, if there is an authority from above, if love and forgiveness and justice and mercy are actually embodied truth in Jesus Christ, then our primary allegiance is not to the state ~ not even to the United States ~ but to the Kingdom of God, to an authority from above. If there is an authority from above then our primary obedience is not to the actors of this world but to the Lamb on the throne.

That understanding of power and authority is what inspired the non-violent protest of the civil rights movement. They simply acted in concert with a higher authority. Listen to what Martin Luther King Jr. said at the Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference:

Let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us realize that William Cullen Bryant is right: "Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again." Let us go out realizing that the Bible is right: "Be not deceived. God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." This is our hope for the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow, with a cosmic past tense, "We have overcome! We have overcome! Deep in my heart, I did believe we would overcome."

Dear friends, our confession is that the powers of this world are passing pretenders. Ultimate, final authority resides “from above.” And yet, that “Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who come from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Let us follow the way of the Lamb on the throne.

For all power and authority are his.

Thanks be to God. Amen.