

**Palm Sunday: Where are you headed?**  
**Sermon 179 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 2, 2023**  
**Matthew 21:1-11**

Power can be a curious thing. Especially when it comes to our spiritual lives. Power isn't a word I remember hearing a lot about in church growing up, except in comments like:

That was a powerful song,  
a powerful prayer,  
a powerful sermon...

But no analysis or acknowledgment of power holders or power brokers.

In 2016 I was in a room with about 25 clergy. We had all decided to meet because of a particular conflict that was going on in our city. It was impacting all of us and all of our congregants. There had been press conferences and meetings with city officials. There had been tough conversations and prayer vigils. All along, the clergy had been trying our best to work together and stay in close communication with one another because the people we served represented a large portion of the population and transcended the usual divisions of class, race, and ethnicity. We felt that together, we had a chance to effect real change for the common good.

At this particular meeting, the clergy were trying to gather ideas for next steps. We all wanted to work together to renew the trust that had been lost between our people and city leaders. We wanted to continue to reiterate some things all of us felt needed to change in order to make that trust possible. And we wanted to find ways to hear and support the people most impacted by this breach of trust.

At one point during the meeting, the pastor of a large, affluent, predominantly white congregation - whose members included many prominent bankers and politicians - spoke up and asked, "What are we really trying to do here?" To which another pastor (also white, male, and leading a different tall-steeple church in town) replied, "We are trying to build power so we can advocate for the common good of our community." The one who had asked the question said back, "If this is about power then I'm out and so are my people, because Jesus was not about power, and neither are we." Upon finishing his sentence, the pastor gathered his things and left the meeting.

I wasn't quite sure what to make of the conversation. I could tell the tension in the room was quite high and yet I felt like I understood where this first pastor was coming from. The Gospel he knew and proclaimed was similar to what I learned in Sunday school. Jesus was about meekness, not might. We should be talking about humility, not power.

His question and frustration made sense to me because it sounded like what I'd always learned in church. It made so much sense until the voice of another pastor broke the silence with a challenging word. It came from one of the black pastors in the room. One with a much smaller congregation and a smaller steeple. His church was only a couple of miles away from the tall-steeple churches where the first two pastors preached, but it was on the "other side of the tracks" nonetheless.

After the door closed behind the pastor who left, and the rest of us were sitting there waiting to see what would happen next, the black pastor of the smaller church looked up and said to the room, "It must be nice not to have to think about power, ... because you have all the power."

It was in that moment and the ones that followed, that I realized for the first time - not thinking about power, is itself, an indicator and expression of it. And when we read the Gospels without recognizing the ways that Jesus himself understands and challenges the power brokers and power structures of his day, we run the risk of missing the point.

The apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:

[Jesus] Who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Jesus, being wholly divine, had access to all the power in the world and yet chose not to exert that power through dominance, wealth, or might; but instead through humility. In Jesus, God emptied himself - becoming one of us, becoming human... becoming a servant to all.

Jesus' commitment to humble power is present throughout the Gospels as he moves through Galilee healing, teaching, and tending to the forgotten. With great intention and precision, Jesus singles out the lowest of the low - the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, the bleeding woman (just to name a few) - and Jesus empowers them through healing, love, and inclusion. These being the primary resources of Jesus' humble power. (healing, love, inclusion)

His mission grew and expanded in popularity as folks - predominantly those who had no other means or access to power - joined in the movement. Eventually, they found themselves on the road to Jerusalem, waving palm branches, laying out their cloaks on the path, and shouting Hosanna! (Which means "save us!"). But on the other side of town, there was another procession for Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. His was a full-on display of military might, imperial wealth, and political power. Each year during the Passover, Pilate traveled from his coastal palace to the city of Jerusalem to maintain law and order, and to make sure no one got out of line during the holiday celebrations.

So on one side of town, Jesus and his lowly band followers process in waving cloaks and palm branches. And on the other side, Pilate arrives with great horses, chariots, and soldiers... a caravan fit for a king. Two very different processions. Two very different crowds. Two very different men.

Matthew makes the contrast even clearer by including Jesus' instruction to the disciples, telling them to go and untie the colt of a donkey for him to ride into town. Thus fulfilling the prophecy from Zechariah 9:

*See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey...*

This part isn't quoted in the Gospel but if we go back to the original text, we find the prophet continues saying...

*I will take away the chariots from Ephraim  
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,  
and the battle bow will be broken.  
He will proclaim peace to the nations...*

Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is the peaceful Messiah; Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is the one toward which the ancient prophecy points and Matthew also wants us to see the stark contrast between God's power and the power of the Roman empire... Between Jesus' power and Pilate's power... Powers displayed in Jesus' procession and Pilate's procession taking place on opposite sides of the tracks (so to speak).

As Christians, we can be quick to imagine ourselves in Jesus' procession. In step with the disciples we wonder whether we would have been the ones to go and get the colt or if we would have lined the streets waving Palms and laying our garments on the street to pave the way for our Savior. It is easy for us to place ourselves there, in Jesus' procession because we have rehearsed it year after year in settings just like this one.

If we are honest, it should also be easy for us to imagine ourselves in Pilate's parade. It should be easy because we have actually attended those kinds of parades many times over. We too have been caught up in the pomp and circumstance, the impressively large horses, the clearly defined lines with little room for variance or error, the crisp uniforms... all displays of imperial strength... Wealth, Glamor and Power all on proud display. We have been to the actual parades AND we have also invested much of ourselves in these sources of power. It is only human to do such things.

But this is why it is so important for us NOT TO IGNORE, but to recognize and understand how power works in the world, in the Gospels, and in our own lives.

What I learned in that room full of pastors back in 2016... What I learned from that less prominent, but infinitely wise pastor is that power is never neutral. Caesar knew it. Pilate knew it. Jesus knew it. Matthew, the evangelist knew it. And Paul the apostle knew it too... power is never neutral.

We all have it to varying degrees. It isn't the possession of it that is in question today, the question is: Given the power that we have... what are we going to do with it? Will we invest and store it up for ourselves? Or will we give it away in humble service, lifting up and empowering those whom the world has forgotten?

Rev. Lisle Gwynne Garrity is the artist who created the piece on the cover of our bulletins today called *Power Play*. I love this piece because it shows just how close the power of Jesus and the power of Pilate can be. In this piece, the two are standing back to back. Touching one another at every point and yet facing in opposite directions. One is concerned with maintaining his own power, the other is set on giving it away, using it to elevate others.

In other years we might challenge ourselves to decide which posture, which procession, and ultimately which power we are going to put our faith in. But this year is a little different. This year - as a Lenten practice - we're not rushing to conclusions or assuming answers, we're simply asking the questions. So this year as we remember, recreate and embody the procession into Jerusalem, knowing full well that the path and power of Jesus will lead us straight to the cross! We are invited to linger in the question:

*Where are we headed? Have we placed our hope, our trust, our faith, and our power in the pompous procession of Pilate... Or in the humble, self-emptying path of Jesus?*