

**Message for June 18, 2017**

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

Betsy Headrick McCrae

Scripture passages: Romans 5:1-8

**Power redefined: Part 1**

As a society we seem to be obsessed with power. We want it! We gotta have it! We have to protect our interests and make sure we aren't being taken advantage of. On this Father's Day perhaps it is appropriate to think of power as it relates particularly, but definitely not exclusively, to masculinity. Steve Thomas, coordinator for Mennonite Men, an organization of Mennonite Church USA, talks about "the forceful verbs of toxic masculinity — fear, hate, disrespect, domination and violation." These are words that seem to call out for a show of power. The power to overcome. The power to wipe our enemies off the face of the earth.

We all recognize this; it's part of the societal air that we breathe. But what about here in the church, in our community of believers, as followers of Jesus Christ? What do we think about power? What are our assumptions? Does this toxicity enter in and influence the way we think and how we act? From where do we get our cues? How is power used and understood in the church, by those who follow Jesus?

Starting this Sunday we're going to look at power from the perspective of our faith. For three Sundays we'll be exploring power dynamics using passages of scripture from Paul's letter to the Romans and the gospel of Matthew. Where will this take us? What do these ancient writings have to teach us? How will the Holy Spirit lead?

Well to start, we come from a place *not* of hostility and fear but of peace and well-being. Listen again to verse 1 from our Romans passage this morning: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Any cause for hostility and fear has been removed. It has been removed at God's initiative through Jesus. There's no manipulative power distance here. God is not keeping us at arms' length. God is not playing with us. Instead, God, our loving father, has invited us in, as loved ones, to dwell with God in a place of peace. Relax, God says to us. Let your guard down. With me you are honored and respected. With me, you are safe. The one who has power, uses that power to come close to and provide refuge for those who are powerless.

Verse 2 says, "through Jesus Christ we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." There's a good power concept – access. The Greek word used here can also be translated "to be introduced." It is a word of privilege with political or religious hierarchical overtones. We are very familiar with this concept. It's all about who you know. You have to know folks to get a good job. You have to be known by others in order to be tapped for promotions or opportunities. The culture of wealth has been described as a culture of connections. It can very difficult to break into these tightly-held circles of power. You need access. You need to be introduced by someone who is trusted. Otherwise you're powerless on the outside looking in.

What God does through Jesus Christ is to break the tightly-held circle wide open. Jesus makes that all-important introduction – for everybody. He gives us total access – no complicated password needed. We are brought into direct relationship with God, a relationship of grace and forgiveness. A relationship in which we are known and our needs are met. This is the solid, unshakable foundation upon which we stand. This is our model for how we are to live with and care for each other as a church. No tightly-held circle designed to protect power and keep others out, but open access, heartfelt

invitations, introductions all around, a real place at the table for all.

Paul goes on to say, “And not only that – not only do we have access to grace – but we also boast in our sufferings.” What? Boast in our sufferings? Those two things don’t go together. First of all there’s the boasting. Boasting sounds arrogant, doesn’t it? We boast when we want to flaunt what we have or what we know or what we have accomplished. Boasting is a show of power, power that inflates the boaster and diminishes others. Why does Paul keep talking about boasting? And why, in this context so positively? Earlier in Romans 3:27 he sings a different tune: “Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded!” he says. Our salvation is not our own doing so that we may boast in our own specialness. It is God’s doing and open to all. Give credit only where credit is due.

But here in Romans 5 Paul instructs the believers to “boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” We are encouraged to “boast in our sufferings.” The key, I think, is in a broader understanding of the Greek word translated as “boast.” In the NIV version of the Bible, this word is translated “rejoice.” It can also be translated “celebrate.” It is wrong to celebrate or rejoice in a salvation or an identity or a social status that elevates us and excludes others. But it is right to rejoice in or celebrate God’s reconciling work on our behalf and on behalf of the world. We boast – we rejoice, we celebrate, we share the joy – about what God does and will do for us and the whole world, no exceptions.

But what about the suffering bit? Why on earth should we rejoice in suffering? This leads us to another interesting take on power and how it is handled. In an honor-shame culture, which was very much the culture of the ancient Middle East, suffering is directly connected to shame. Suffering happens because someone who is superior,

someone who has more honor, humiliates an inferior. Making someone suffer is a way to exert one's power. Actually, that sounds very familiar, doesn't it? Making someone suffer is seen as a way of keeping the upper hand. On the other hand, having to suffer, especially in this honor-shame context, is insufferable. It is degrading. It is tantamount to being declared worthless and rejected. It is powerlessness underlined, reinforced and out there for the world to see.

But God doesn't see it that way. Through Jesus Christ, God turns this way of acting and thinking upside-down. God refuses to play this game. In fact, God totally undermines the rationale. John E. Toews, who wrote the Believers Church Bible Commentary on Romans, describes what's happening in this passage from Romans 5 in patron-client language. He writes:

“This text pictures God as the Patron who freely gives new status and privileges to the client, humanity. God the Patron is clearly the superior person in the narrative. God is righteous and loving. God is the person of honor. Humanity, the client, is a weak, ungodly, sinful enemy. Humanity represents the dishonorable, the shameful.

“God, the honorable Patron, acts against all social convention and honors the shameful client. God gives the client a new status – righteousness. This gifts the client with enormous privileges – peace with God, access to God, hope of sharing the glory of God. The dishonorable client is the recipient of God's love. The client is reconciled with God and is assured of future salvation. God the Patron gives all of this to humanity, the client, freely and without obligation, through the death of Christ.”

John Toews goes on to explain, “Paul elaborates the meaning of Christ's death as a gracious gift through the metaphor of the dominant social system of the day – patron-

client – and the dominant social value – honor-shame. The patron, not the client, takes all the initiative to establish a relationship of honor that overcomes the distance between them and replaces shame with honor. God the Patron is a model of how those who are strong in the church should relate to those who are weak.”

Acting against all social convention God, the strong one, gives honor to those who are weak. Suffering is no longer able to inflict great shame. Instead those who suffer are pulled into God’s healing orbit: “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” The one with power goes to great lengths to lift up those who are powerless. To give them hope. To make sure that they know that they, too, have full access to the love of God.

John Thomas of Mennonite Men, writes about coming to terms with those **forceful verbs of toxic masculinity — fear, hate, disrespect, domination and violation – which so shape our culture.** “In one of our retreats,” he writes, “we claim our identity as beloved sons of God, called to love as Jesus loved. We turn to the writer’s word to the young Timothy: ‘God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit who makes us strong, loving and wise’ (2 Timothy 1:7).

“Together, these three characteristics in dynamic tension form the basis for healthy masculinity. It’s not about being passive or timid — as sometimes presented in our Anabaptist tradition — but being strong, loving and wise in the Spirit. The practice of love is coupled with strength (or power) and wisdom. Within this framework, we can understand how to exercise power in constructive ways.

“Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the transforming power of God’s love,” John Thomas goes on to say. “He described the dynamic tension between love and power. King taught that appeals of love ‘must be undergirded by some form of constructive power.’ Power and love are not opposites, as often thought, where ‘love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love.’ Instead, ‘what is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.’ Knowing how to exercise love and power requires wisdom. Action that unites love, strength and wisdom is especially powerful. This is what Jesus demonstrated to bring about God’s peace.”

[end of words from John Thomas]

Knowing how to exercise love and power requires wisdom. It also requires fortitude and commitment, and a willingness to respond differently than what society dictates, to sometimes turn things upside-down. As people of faith we start with the understanding that through Jesus Christ God has reached out to us and drawn us close. This is our starting place, the foundation upon which we stand. We stand firm on the knowledge that there is nothing that can ever separate us – or indeed the world – from God’s love. If we have any power, it stems from this sense of security that cannot be shaken.

As followers of Jesus we will use the power we have to open wide the doors and provide access for all to God’s grace and hope. We will offer invitations to those who are hesitant. We will make introductions for those who are on the outside looking in. We will continually look for ways to make things possible. I recently came across a

wonderful article by Kaitlin B. Curtice. She writes about “space-holding people.” “They are the ones,” she says, “who bring justice and shalom, because they are patient people who hold onto a long-off vision. We need them in our churches, because they will not force change. They will not sit in pews and bear judgment over the people around them, but they will sit with those people and wait for God to show them the way.” We have some of these folks right here in Glennon Heights Mennonite Church. Space-holding people. Patiently waiting, holding power lightly and providing access as the Holy Spirit leads.

As followers of Jesus, we will use whatever power we have to stand with, encourage and support those who are suffering. We won’t look away. Neither will we belittle or denigrate those for whom life is difficult or unlovely. Instead we will hold the candle of hope for them, knowing that at some point they may need to hold the candle for us. We will honor their experience. We will enter into it with them, to the best of our abilities. For us, weakness is never a failure or shortcoming. Instead it is a place where God’s love is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. We rejoice in this reality.

Knowing how to exercise love and power requires wisdom. Action that unites love, strength and wisdom is especially powerful. This is what Jesus demonstrated to bring about God’s peace. For while we were still weak, Christ died for us. He used his power to draw us close to God. If we are faithful, this is what we will do as well.

In a society obsessed with power, we follow the One who emptied himself of all power for the sake of the world. Help us, dear Lord, to follow. Amen.