

**Message for June 25, 2017**

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Matthew 10:24-39

**Power redefined: Part 2**

“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” One of our president’s favorite insults is “loser.” “What a loser!” he says with contempt. He expresses the sentiments of many, I think. Our society definitely likes winners, not losers. To the victor go the spoils. In other words, winners are the ones who rightly have and wield all the power. To their benefit, of course. But this doesn’t seem to be the way that Jesus thinks. “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Losers become the winners in Jesus’ upside-down way of looking at things. What are the power dynamics here?

Today is part two of our series, “power redefined.” Last week we looked at power from the perspective of Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 5. As followers of Jesus, we know that we stand on a firm foundation of love and acceptance. We dwell in God’s house. We are safe in God’s love. There is no need to be anxious or afraid. We don’t have to worry about our defense. God, the one with all the power, uses that power to come close to and provide refuge for those who are powerless.

Any power we have comes from this position of safety and blessing. And it is meant to be shared. We don’t keep power to ourselves; instead we break open the tightly-held circles. We offer introductions. We invite people in. We are space-holding people. Patiently waiting, holding power lightly and providing access as the Holy Spirit leads.

As followers of Jesus, we use what power we have to lift up and care for those

who are suffering. We do not belittle or denigrate those for whom life is difficult or unlovely. For us, weakness is never seen as failure or shortcoming. Instead it is a place where God's love is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. This place of suffering is where we choose to stand.

Standing on principle is what our scripture passage from Matthew is all about. It's a tough one: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," Jesus says. "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." Yikes! What are we supposed to think about this?

Jesus is being brutally honest, I think. He's telling folks that following him – really following him, which is something that he demands – is not easy. In fact, it can be downright wrenching at times. It can throw one's life into disarray. This happens because following Jesus often goes against the societal grain. Really following Jesus puts one at odds with the dominant narrative. In society's eyes, following Jesus into places of injustice, poverty, hurt and suffering, makes you a pariah, a thorn in the flesh, a loser. And no one likes a loser.

So, how are we supposed to deal with this tough stuff? Richard Rohr says that standing strong in the faith requires "inner authority. "We need True Gospel authority," he says. "The authority to heal and renew, is not finally found in a hierarchical office, a theological argument, a perfect law, or a rational explanation. The Crucified One revealed to the world that the real power that changes people and the world is an inner authority that comes from those who have lost, let go, and are re-found on a new level."

Inner authority: That's the kind of power we need to be able to truly follow Jesus.

It comes to those who have lost, let go, and are re-found on a new level. “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” So, what does this look like in real life? We have some good examples in our own Mennonite/Anabaptist tradition. Claire Franz has been researching the history of conscientious objectors during World War II. I have asked her to share with us about how some of these folks had the courage of their convictions and followed Jesus even when it meant being willing to lose their lives. Claire, please come tell us a story.

[Claire shares]

Conscientious objectors in World Wars I and II called on an inner authority that had been nurtured by their faith, was supported by their communities and guided by the Holy Spirit. They were nobodies, really, often simple farm boys, but they had the power they needed to stand firm and buck the system, refusing to participate in what they knew to be wrong, acting on what they knew to be right. They suffered for it. And they paved the way for less painful alternatives to be put in place for conscientious objectors who followed after them. Because of them, being a conscientious objector is now a legitimate option. Thanks be to God.

But there are other unpopular paths that Jesus urges us to follow. Paths that challenge the injustice and oppression that exist in our society. Paths that take us to uncomfortable places. Paths that perhaps make for trouble in our communities and in our families because we don't see eye to eye, because what we bring to light and want to talk about and act on challenges the comfortable status quo. Leroy Barber, an African American pastor in Elkhart, Indiana, encourages pastors in his area to be proactive in promoting racial justice in their communities. He acknowledges that this is difficult.

“Peacemaking can stir up a whole lot of trouble,” he says. Sounds like Jesus, doesn’t it: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Peacemaking sometimes first requires disturbing the peace.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.” The power to implement the demands of justice is the inner authority that comes from the Holy Spirit to those who have lost, let go, and are re-found on a new level. This power is gained by trusting completely in and fully identifying with Jesus Christ. Above all else. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” This power, this inner authority, enables us to be real losers, if necessary, so that through us, with us, God’s redeeming, reconciling work can be done.

Brothers and sisters, we may be losers but we are never, ever lost. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” Jesus says, “rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Jesus tells his disciples, and us, not to be intimidated. Have no fear, he says. The power of persecutors to destroy life and make things miserable is, after all, a limited power. It has no lasting effect. The One who wields ultimate power over life and death knows who you are and values you highly. To God your life is not cheap or expendable. You are deeply loved. The only thing you need to fear is being unfaithful, which by your own doing cuts you off from the giver of life.

“Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.” Dear Lord, help

us to let go of our false sense of security, knowing that we will be re-found on a new level. Give us the inner authority we need to follow you wherever you may lead. Amen.