

Message for July 2, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: Romans 6:1-14

Power redefined: Part 3

We U.S. Americans love our independence. We are a free country, free people. No one has dominion over us! In a couple of days we will be celebrating this with picnics and fireworks. Happy Independence Day! We are free, the story goes, because wars have been and are being fought in our defense. We are free because as a country we are a greater power. We are the ones who have dominion. We are the powerful ones who rule the world. That's our story and we're sticking to it ... or are we?

Today is part three of our series, "power redefined." Two weeks ago we looked at power from the perspective of Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 5. What we saw there is that as followers of Jesus, we stand on a firm foundation of love and acceptance. We dwell in God's house. We are safe in God's love. God, the one with all the power, uses that power to come close to and provide refuge for those who are powerless.

It became clear that 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 also 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 empowering love is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Power is to be used to care for the weak.

Last week we looked at Jesus' teachings in Matthew 10. We talked about how difficult it can be sometimes to truly follow Jesus. Especially when following Jesus challenges the comfortable status quo. In order to be able to do this we need a special kind of power. Richard Rohr articulated this for us: "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." This inner authority allows us to lose our life, if need be, in order to find it again. Power to change and make changes comes from deep inside.

This theme from Matthew 10 – dying in order to gain new life – shows up again in our scripture passage for this morning: Romans, chapter 6. Listen to verse 4: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." A major power shift is happening here. Paul uses strong power language to make his point. Verse 6: "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." Verse 9: "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him." Enslavement, dominion – these are Big power concepts. We've moved into a whole new realm.

John E. Toews, who wrote the Believers' Church Bible Commentary on the book of Romans, says that in order to understand what Paul is saying, we've got to think big. He says that sin in this passage is not "sins." It's Sin with a capital S. Capital S Sin, he says, is a cosmic and powerful magnetic force that seeks to pull everything into its field.

Capital S Sin is both a ruler and a kingdom which dominates humanity. People living in capital S Sin, exist in a domain that is ruled by a master who controls them. And not for their own good. The outcome is always Death.

Now most of us like to think that we are the masters of our own fate. No one controls us. We make our own decisions. We think for ourselves. We are free and independent. But the fact of the matter is that no one is ever free of influence. No one is a clean slate, able to weigh all options equally. We all have a play book whether we recognize it as that or not. Something else, something bigger than us, wields a lot of power over us and in effect, calls the shots.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls this the “dominant script.” He writes, “The dominant script of both selves and communities in our society, for both liberals and conservatives, is the script of therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life.”

This script is therapeutic because we assume there is a product, treatment or process to counteract every ache and pain and discomfort, so that life may be lived without inconvenience.

It is technological because the assumption is that everything can be fixed and made right through human ingenuity.

This dominant script is consumerist because we live in a culture that believes that the whole world and all its resources are available to us without regard to the neighbor. It assumes that more is better and that “if you want it, you need it.”

Militarism pervades our society to maintain the system and guarantee and deliver all that is needed for therapeutic technological consumerism.

“This script pervades every dimension of our common life,” Brueggeman says. It shapes us and forms us. It is unconsciously our guide. Though we may think we are above it all, we are not neutral or free from its influence. As followers of Jesus Christ this is something that we must recognize. “It is our task,” Brueggemann says, “to detach ourselves from that powerful script.” In his letter to the Romans, Paul is talking about exactly this.

Recognizing and then detaching ourselves from the powerful dominant script is a hard thing to do. It always has been. This is an old, tenacious problem. As old as the Old Testament. I like the way Walter Brueggemann explains it in his book, *Journey to the Common Good*. Old Testament stories are so very human and therefore still applicable to today.

Throughout the history of the Israelites, Brueggemann writes, there was a contest between the neighborliness promoted by the commandments of God at Sinai and the kingly rule of exploitation. There were competing narratives at play.

The Mount Sinai narrative is a story with an “uncommon social ethic,” he says. It’s a story of neighborliness that is rooted in a notion of abundance: don’t withhold wages to poor people, structure your economy “to make regular provision for the needy and the marginalized,” and so on. The Mount Sinai narrative is a story of a people who have been delivered out of slavery. They trust in the abundance of the fields, in the mercy and generosity of God, and treat their neighbors accordingly.

The second narrative, writes Brueggemann, is a powerful counternarrative. It’s the age-old story of Pharaoh, who hoarded food, defended it with a standing army, and perpetrated a culture of fear and an economy of scarcity. Pharaoh provided bare

necessities for the poor, but at the cost of their freedom; he amassed wealth through exploitation.

The people of Israel eventually succumb to this powerful counternarrative, the story of empire. With King Solomon, they develop what Brueggemann calls a “royal consciousness,” similar to that of Pharaoh’s empire. “The draw back into the fearful, anxious world of Pharaoh is enormously compelling for almost all of us,” he writes.

The royal consciousness involves a heavily-managed society: the king dominates the people with a bureaucracy, a system of taxes, and a standing army. The royal consciousness, says Brueggemann, thrives in a culture of affluence. It is “made possible by an oppressive social policy,” and is given theological sanction by a “controlled, static religion.” It becomes a dominant script.

The alternative, promoted by the prophet Jeremiah, is “steadfast love, justice, and righteousness.” This includes solidarity, redistribution, and “active intervention to correct every humanity-diminishing activity.” In the New Testament, we see Jesus standing in the historical stream of the prophets, challenging the assumptions of the royal consciousness. Taking on the powerful dominant script.

Jesus does this by facing head-on all the fear and anxiety of the dominant script. Instead of cultivating relationships only with those in power, Jesus also hangs out with those who are neglected and hurting. He identifies and casts out demons. He overturns the tables of those who exploit. He challenges religious rules and regulations that suck the life out of the people. In other words, he isn’t afraid to come up against Sin with a capital S. Even when this means probable destruction. He takes his resistance to the limit. He faces the ultimate threat. He goes even as far as small d death.

And then we see where the power really lies. This power is not with capital S Sin. It is not with capital D Death. Instead it is with capital L Life. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a major power event. It is a reordering event. It is a world-changing event. “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him,” Paul writes. Amazingly, what God did in Jesus extends to us as well. We who have been baptized into Christ Jesus, we who have thrown our lot in with him, we who have pledged our allegiance, have also died to Sin with a capital S. We have detached ourselves from the powerful dominant script. We are no longer held captive. Sin no longer has dominion over us. We are not, however, somehow footloose and fancy free. We are not independent. There’s still a play book to follow. But now it’s God’s play book which guides us. We serve a different master. We take our cues from the One who cares for, empowers and encourages us, from the One who gives us new life.

“Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies,” Paul writes. Don’t get complacent, he says. Don’t underestimate the seductive pull of the therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life. We Christians who have died to Sin with a capital S must continuously choose to think differently about ourselves. We must resist the siren call of the dominant script. We recognize the power that it holds. We don’t take that lightly. It is very real. But it is not our final reality. We are God’s people. We belong to the One who transforms death into life.

And that takes us full circle. Power for us as followers of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with dominion over or subjugation of others. Neither is it about

independence or distance from the disturbing cares of the world. Instead power as we see it revealed through Jesus is redefined as the inner authority – born of deep faith – to face even death in resistance to injustice, hard-heartedness and greed. It is undergirded by the certainty that God holds our hopes, our dreams, our present, past and future in God’s loving hands. God, the Creator, the Source, the one with all the power, uses that power to come close to and provide refuge for us who are powerless. God’s power opens doors, breaks down barriers, lifts up the weak and cares deeply for those who are suffering. It is power that is freely shared. It is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Our story, as followers of the Crucified One, is not a story of independence and world domination. It is instead the story of an “uncommon social ethic,” a story of abundance, mercy and generosity. Ours is the story of a power event that takes the oomph out of the dominant script and offers an alternative to living with fear and greed. It is power redefined as love which makes all things new.

Sisters and brothers, this is the word of the Lord and it can be trusted. Amen.