

Recollected:***“In Power: Forgiveness, Service, & Peace”*****Introduction:**

Well, People of God, in spite of all the disruption that's going on around us, one thing we're not going to disrupt is the preaching plan that I shared with us a few weeks ago. Because I'm an inflexible person. I guess?

We're still in this series of revisiting, remixing, correcting old things we've seen before, and talking about them in a new way for a new moment.

And, look: Nothing about this moment in our society is like any moment we've lived through. It's a new thing, and so we need to take time to consider, anew, what it means to be us in this new context. And today what I hope we can do is consider, anew, what it means to live in light of the power we have as God's children, as People of God: Christians.

What I want us to leave with after this moment is the sense that we are people of great, great power. It is revealed in subtle and sublime ways, ways that don't seem radical in the moment of their expression, but erode evil like tides erode a shore. Let's pray!

Prayer:***Power: Abuse & Misuse Among the Goodhearted***

People of goodwill rarely abuse power, but they often misuse it. Does this make sense? People of goodwill rarely abuse power--they have goodwill, after all!--but they often misuse it.

If we don't acknowledge the power we have, we will misuse it. If we don't acknowledge the power we have, we will misuse it.

I think of parenting, of being a parent. It's hard to keep in mind how much power I have in Bo's life. Everything I do shapes her understanding of herself, of me, of God, of the way the world works. And while I know that I have power in this relationship, power in so many ways, I don't experience the way I interact with Bo as one in which I hold power. I'm just being dad, you know? I don't think of myself as a person who has power in Bo's life. And if I forget it, when I forget it, I misuse the power I have to shape her character.

And we Christians are people of goodwill, who often don't recognize the power that we have, and so we often misuse it. We just don't recognize the power that we really have in the world, in our relationships, and so we often misuse it.

The Measure of Right Use or Misuse:

The measure of our power, of its rightness or wrongness, of its goodness or badness, appropriate use or misuse, is whether or not it matches up with how Jesus used the power he had. Our power must be modeled after Christ's use of power.

And we realize that to say this only kicks the hard decisions down the road. Asking "What would Jesus do?" to easy questions gives easy answers: Would Jesus beat up an orphan? No. "I guess I won't either!"

Asking it to the harder questions is the start of the riddle of Christian living. "It all depends" is a starting place for more

conversation about the situation we find ourselves in, whatever it is. Would Jesus risk illness to care for others? Well, he did. Should we? Well...it all depends.

But there are things we can say about the ways we should use our power well, because there are things that clearly follow from the character of Jesus and the work he did.

I want to talk about three things this morning, three ways our power is flexed and revealed to those around us, and even to ourselves.

These are three: Forgiveness, Service, and Peacemaking. These three things--Forgiveness, Service, and Peacemaking--are things Jesus did that we can--maybe must--do, too. To do these things is to use our power well. To flex our strength as Christians.

Let's talk first about Forgiveness, one of our great powers.

Forgiveness:

Forgiveness is one of the greatest powers that we have. It's powerfully externally and internally, powerful for the person we're forgiving and for us as forgivers.

At its most basic, forgiveness is just eating the costs of another person's sin. We don't demand that we're paid back, don't demand that retribution is made, don't demand that our emotional, physical, psychological costs are made up for. We eat the costs, live with the costs. If there was a debt owed, we live with the hole where wealth once was, and release the person from ever trying to fill that hole.

We eat the costs of the other person's behavior. This is powerful. For the other person, it is freedom. Here's what I mean: If you hurt my feelings, telling me I'm nice a thousand times does not make up for that hurt. We live in a legal justice system in which every crime is monetized. You can park illegally, and pay a fee; you can light a fire in an alley, burn down a building, and have your wages garnished. This pay back is in addition to other punishment sometimes, but it's almost always there. And so we've come to believe that every wrong action has a cash value; emotional distress, psychological damage, all the lawsuits around these things, they have a cash value. This is not biblical, even though we read this back into the Bible, because it's so natural to us to believe. But the truth is that actively hating me can not be made up by actively encouraging me. There is no shared unit of value between the two; once you hurt me, you've hurt me, period. Encouraging me is nice, but it is of a different kind. It doesn't fill the hole of hurt, it just adds to the pile of encouragement. Does this make sense?

But when I forgive someone, I say to them, you don't have to try to do the impossible, which is make up for what you did. Now; if you kill my brand new horse, and I have no use or relationship with that horse, and you buy me another, nicer horse, immediately, that's a similar situation, I guess. In this hypothetical situation you could maybe make up for what you did, except even then, you've acted against me in anger or negligence, and you can't undo that.

But nearly all of the ways we actually hurt people cannot be made up for. They simply are done, and no amount of cash, no amount of good words, no amount of anything can fill the holes we dig in another person's heart. Does this make

sense? A positive does not make up for a negative, not when it comes to matters of the heart, matters of the spirit, matters of our lives. So forgiveness, ultimately, is eating the costs of what another person has done, and saying “I won’t make you try to pay me back for what you’ve done, because you simply can’t.” It’s saying “I’ll live with this hurt. I’ll eat the costs. The hurt is mine, now; a gift nothing can un-make and you cannot take back.”

And the power of forgiveness, for we who forgive, is this: When we forgive, that wound, that hurt, that emotional or psychological or spiritual cost that we carry, which no one can make up for, it begins to be healed. Not immediately, not without effort, not without, maybe, pain; but the hole, the wound, it can be healed. Unforgiveness is a trap; it feels like we hold the other person in our power, but really, what it does is give power to the hurt we’ve felt, power to never heal. Power over our choices, our motivations, our fears. Forgiveness is empowering; it frees us to move forward with our lives, when the misuse, or the abuse, done against us seeks to cripple us forever.

And, of course, forgiveness does free the person we forgive from striving to undo something they can never undo. This power, the power of freeing someone from an impossible task of “paying us back” is something that is most seen in those relationships we value, because of course, it’s those relationships we value, and the sins done against us in them, that really hurt, that really cost us in an emotional, spiritual way.

I could nuance this in all sorts of ways: Forgiveness isn't reconciliation. Forgiving someone doesn't mean we trust

them forever after; in fact, when we are empowered by forgiveness, it often strengthens our boundaries and our sense of what we should or shouldn't trust others with. But do we see the power that forgiveness is? It empowers us to be healed, to own our experiences, rather than deny them; it empowers those we forgive to not try to do the impossible, and pay back what cannot be paid back. It creates gratitude, intimacy, deeper knowledge of the other, and trust. Forgiveness reminds us of God, of God's pleasure in our company, no matter what we've done or think we've done.

And beyond all this, Forgiveness is a power because forgiveness is something we control. We control whether or not we forgive people; no one can wrestle forgiveness from us, demand it from us, beat it out of us. It's a matter of the heart, and unseen, and ours alone to offer. Unforgiveness gives control of our emotional, spiritual, and psychological lives away; forgiveness returns control to us.

And of course, we forgive because we have been forgiven. Paul reminds us, over and over, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." and "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Jesus, dying, cried out concerning his murderers, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." We pray, as Jesus taught us, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We pray, all the time, that the forgiveness we receive from God would be modeled after the forgiveness we offer others.

God ate the costs of our sin, is always eating them, and for

us, the result is gratitude, just as those who we love, when we forgive them for hurting us, respond to us in thanks, in relief, and in a renewed desire to treat us well. God wants us to be empowered, to live out the capability and power we have as his children. And forgiving others is a realization of that; its the proof that we realize we've been forgiven by God.

But I know, even as I say all this, that we are deeply wounded people. Let's talk about Service, another of our great powers.

Service:

When we serve others we flex our power as God's children.

Let me start with Jesus this time. We've maybe heard some of these things.

Two brothers, Jesus' disciples, ask their mom to ask Jesus if they can be his go-to guys when he gets his full kingly power. When the other disciples hear about it, and get upset, Jesus says this: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your servant—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

To be a part of the Church, part of God's People, means to seek to serve others, rather than to try to become the most important. And this charge follows directly from the example Jesus himself has set. Paul reminds us that Jesus, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God

something to be used to his own advantage; instead, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

Jesus, right before he was sold out by Judas, knelt down and washed the feet of the disciples like a slave would do, and tells them “Do you understand what I have done for you?...You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

Again, we’re meant to serve one another. He tells his disciples, in a parable, that what they do to the “least of these,”--how they feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, dress the naked, serve the sick, and visit the prisoner--when they do this, Jesus takes it as service done to himself.

You can almost randomly open your New Testament and find a passage that talks about Jesus’ identity as a servant of God and the fact that we who trust him have been made for the same service--to each other and to those who don’t yet trust God. We have been made for service.

And service is a power in the most basic sense: For those who follow Christ, service is a function of our identity. When we who are Christians serve others, we do what we have been made to do.

We have been made for and gifted for service. The Holy Spirit, God's own self, lives in and among us, and has shaped us such that we have what we need to do what God asks of us. The gifts that God has given to us--and the talents and skills—aren't for us alone.

To be a Christian is to be empowered with gifts that the congregation we're a part of, and the world we live in, need. The church needs us. The world needs us. Service is the embodiment of the power we have.

In fact, Christian Power and Christian Service might share the same definition. All service is, really, is using our power for another's good. This is seen in Jesus, right? Who, though God, acted as a servant for every person everywhere. Service is the employment, the discharge of power, for the sake of another person.

Peter tells us, "Whoever serves should do so from the strength that God furnishes. Do this so that in everything God may be honored through Jesus Christ. To him be honor and power forever and always." Realizing that our service is not for ourselves, seeks not our own good, but the good of others; it leads inevitably to worship.

And serving in this way, "from the strength that God furnishes," it keeps us from the very real truth that we can serve others for ourselves—for cash, for prestige and reputation. But when we are most truly ourselves, we are those who serve others for their good, in Jesus' name. No one can feel powerful if they're out of touch with who you really are. If we aren't engaged in service of some form or another, we aren't acting like the people Jesus has made us to be.

Peacemaking:

Another of our powers, as Christians, is that we can be peacemakers in the world.

Jesus, we know, came to make peace between a divided humanity: Jews on the one hand, everyone else on the other. Paul tells us in Romans, “Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness combined with our faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We are those who are at peace with God and with all humanity, and none of the basic things that divide people can be, for us, a source of division. And as people marked by peace, enemies of no one, we make peace; so Jesus says “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called Children of God.”

We can resist the divisions and conflicts and fights the world seeks to draw us into, and if you order now, you get not just this offer, but more! Because we can even experience inner peace as we resist the world's divisions. Paul reminds us, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

We are people at peace with God, who then make peace with others, rejecting the world's call to become enemies of people. In this troubled world, we can experience inner peace. And beyond this, as we become “convinced,” as Paul puts it, “that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons nor heavenly rulers, neither the present nor the

future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord," as we become convinced of this, that God loves us--enjoys us, appreciates us, wants our company, we can live at peace with ourselves and who we are.

That's is no small thing. Most of the people we've met are trying to prove themselves to somebody.

We're promised by Christ himself, "My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives; do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid." The world does not give peace and it does not give anything permanently; but as Christians, this is exactly what we're given. In richer or poorer, in sickness and health. Like all these things, peacemaking starts at home, starts with friends and family, where we best practice best practices.

Are we conflict avoiders? Are we conflict builders? Are we makers of peace? Do we soothe or ignite division? And where do we act?

Because some of us might be great at work, or great with the church, in bringing peace to relationships, helping guide people to inner peace, but in another context--with that co-worker, with that friend, with our spouse or our child or our parent--we just, we just make things worse. We make things worse. We throw up our hands. We say that the conflict we're in "just is," as if it came from nowhere and as if we can't do anything to make it smaller.

Peacemaking is not suppression of our emotions, it is not

denial of evil. It is simply the choice, the powerful, heavenly choice, to not escalate anger into active hatred, dislike into active violence, or any evil into greater evil. Instead, through creative, consistent wisdom, together with others who also seek to be like Jesus, we deny the satisfying, sinful stimulation of retribution.

We don't repay evil for evil, but instead we overcome evil by doing good. And we do this in all the places we find ourselves facing evil, sin, and conflict, which is every place we go. There are few powers more startling or more attention-getting in this world of ours than when we choose, knowing what that choice may get us, to make peace when angry division or violent conflict are being cheered on.

Power's Root: Humility

These are our powers. Forgiveness, Service, and Peacemaking. These are the things we have been created by God to do, the character of Christ that we've been called to embody as individuals and as the Church, Jesus' surrogate, on earth until he returns. And underlying these three powers of ours is is humility.

Humility is demanded of us if we're going to serve those who don't, as we reckon it, "deserve" our service--our affection, patience, effort, time, treasure, or talent.

It takes humility to release people from trying to pay back to us a debt that they cannot repay, replace something in our souls that they cannot replace.

It takes humility to believe that if we ask God for peace, God will give it to us, that if we resist returning violence when we

have received it, we can actually bring about the end of violence. It takes humility to apologize, and stop conflict, which always seeks to escalate itself.

Questions:

So, in what relationships do you need to flex your power of forgiveness? For your own sake or for the sake of another?

What opportunities has God given you in which you could flex your power of serving others? Will you?

In what relationships do you need to flex your power of making peace? In what ways is “the peace of God” made real in your life or in your relationships?

We may not think of forgiveness, of service, of peacemaking as powers to flex. But if we don't own them, we will misuse them.

We'll serve people we like, and not others. And we'll do it well, because, you know, we have great power to serve.

We'll forgive those who really show contrition, or who have only kind of hurt us, but we'll reject forgiveness for those who don't seem to care, or who have hurt us incredibly deeply, and our power will short out, and our freedom from their hurts will only be sort-of realized.

We'll make peace with those who are near, and those who are far off we'll encourage one another to dislike, in principle if not in action. God won't withdraw the strength he's given us; we'll still have it. We'll still act with it. But we'll do it

incompletely. We'll be like children, who think they know how to use some dangerous tool or weapon, and end up hurting ourselves or others.

Let's not do that stuff.