

“Power: Use it or Lose it or You’ll Lose it Anyway”

1 Samuel 8: 1-18, John 18: 33-37

The Rev. Zachary Wilson

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Christ the King Sunday

One time I was preaching at an ecumenical Thanksgiving service at a Catholic church in White Bear Lake and a child came up to me and asked me if I was a judge. I replied that “No. I’m just a Presbyterian.”

Today is the last Sunday in the liturgical calendar—Christ the King Sunday. So we’re going to explore power today.

Power. That’s what “Christ the King Sunday” is about. Now, don’t let that word “king” get in your way. A king is someone who exercises, or can exercise great power. And while the most powerful of our day are not kings—the crown prince of Saudi Arabia notwithstanding—they have more power than the Pontius Pilate or even his boss, the emperor Tiberius, can even conceive of. The President of this nation may not be a king, but he has enough nuclear weaponry at his fingertips to eliminate all human life on the planet. We may not have kings but power is real enough. And “Christ the King Sunday” is about power. In our story today.

1. Who has it? Pilate or Jesus?
2. What are power’s uses, abuses, and misuses?
3. What’s the difference between how the powerful of the world conceive of their power and what Jesus means by “power?”

As we start thinking about power I want to take a rest stop at behavioral economics. As one does. Two of the most important people in behavioral economics are not economists but psychologists: Danny Kahneman and Amos Tversky. They didn’t start out trying to affect economics but their work has affected how economists think in profound ways. And one of the most profound is the notion of loss aversion.

Loss aversion. It’s why Jesus is having this conversation with Pilate today. To oversimplify it loss aversion means that human beings are much more sensitive to losses—or perceived losses—of what they already possess than they are motivated by the possibility of obtaining something better.

Loss aversion is why Jesus is with Pilate in our reading today. The spiritual and political leaders of Israel—King Herod, the scribes, the priests, the Pharisees—all have a certain amount of power. They would like more. And when they see what’s going on around Jesus they see a threat to that power.

The unconventional way that Jesus is exercising power feels so threatening to the powers that be that they need him dead to preserve their power. So they plot his arrest and execution.

So Jesus is arrested. But the leaders in Israel are under another power: the Roman Empire. And if they want to preserve their power by having Jesus executed they're going to have to appeal to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

And Pilate is the agent of an empire. And empires are, by their nature, made up of many conquered people who would prefer to be unconquered. It's Pilate's job to preserve Rome's power. Now it's pretty clear that Pilate doesn't see Jesus as a particular threat to him or to the Roman Empire. But the leaders who have sent him Jesus? They could cause him real problems. If we kept reading we'd find that Pilate can't really find a reason to execute Jesus but he knows the leaders in Jerusalem want him dead. And that could be a threat to Rome's power. And Empires don't want to lose their power. So, Jesus is sentenced to die because both the native powers that be and the Roman Empire are afraid of losing their power. Jesus dies because of loss aversion. Well there are other reasons Jesus dies, but loss aversion is certainly one of them. Behavioral economics, eh? Not so bad.

In the midst of this drama that's happening all around him—as the powerful are trying to preserve their power—Jesus has a conversation with Pilate.

Pilate is trying to figure out what power means to Jesus. Now the priests and leaders who have handed Jesus over to Pilate aren't dumb. They know that Pilate doesn't really care about their internecine religious feuds. But they do know that Pilate will care about someone claiming political power. So they tell Pilate that Jesus has political ambitions and that he styles himself "King of the Jews." Which is a lie, because, you might have heard—people will lie to avoid losing their power. So Pilate asks Jesus directly, "Are you King of the Jews?"

And I can just see Jesus rolling his eyes at the question—well he would roll them if his life wasn't at stake. And he replies: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" In other words, "Who told you that?"

And, like I said, Pilate doesn't care about Jewish squabbles, but he does care about preserving his power: "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

And Pilate's getting frustrated at this point, "So are you a king?" He wants to know if he Jesus will confess the crime of sedition—because then Pilate can just have him summarily executed. But Jesus knows the ways of power in the world and knows what Pilate thinks being a king means. He knows they want to avoid losing their power.

As much as I love Kahneman and Taversky, they have nothing on Jesus. Jesus was a pretty good behavioral psychologist and economist before either psychology or economics existed. Jesus has seen the ways of empire in the world and wants nothing to do with it.

Why else would he say “My Kingdom is not of this world”? He has no desire to live out of the fear of losing power. Which is how power operates in our world far too often. It corrupts. People will lie, cheat, steal to avoid losing it. Even if there is something better near at hand. “So are you a king?” asks Pilate

And Jesus gives another perplexing reply: “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Jesus is not averse to loss. He does not want to protect his power. He wants to build a different sort of world. His vision of the world, God’s vision of the world, is not in this world. Not yet.

And Pilate, knowing that power can bend the truth to its wishes, retorts “What is truth?” And while the truth can be bent it can’t be utterly broken. Those who have power and are afraid to lose it, will still die. If we don’t use our power, we’ll lose it anyway. That truth can’t be bent.

So how does Jesus see power? How does Jesus use power? How is Jesus a king? He’s not a king like any other, that’s for sure.

When God promised Abraham that God would bless him and make his name great it wasn’t so Abraham could sit on his blessings in order to keep them from getting away. God blessed Abraham so that he would be a blessing and through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. When an individual or community has the blessing of power—and wealth is another form of power—the way of the kings of the earth, the powerful is to protect that power for fear of losing it. For more than a thousand years, since the Roman Emperor Constantine quit persecuting Christians and coopted Christianity to be the religion of his empire and a tool of conquest the church of Jesus Christ has often allied itself with the powers and principalities and kingdoms of this world in order to preserve its power.

In some ways this continues to this day. Rather than prophetically speaking and acting to care for the poor and oppressed many Christians seek political gain and are willing to support tyranny to avoid feeling like they’re losing power.

But we see the way of Jesus. If we have power we are to use it to be a blessing. Power is to be used, not hoarded because we’re afraid of losing it.

Here at the House of Hope we have been given so much—so much knowledge and expertise in its membership, such riches of music and architecture, arts, and service. Far beyond every other church I’ve served—and I’ve served many as a transitional pastor.

We sit here on Summit Avenue. The street of power and wealth in Saint Paul. I stand here clothed in robes that look to the world like a judge, that vest me with power, in a pulpit raised above all of you.

It's a good place to be, on Summit, in a robe, in a high pulpit. I'm enjoying it. The tendency of any congregation so situated, any pastor in such a pulpit is use our power to avoid losing it.

The reality of how this church has chosen to use its power has stories of great beauty and service—providing enormous resources and expertise to make sure Prior Crossing got built and continues to be supported. Supporting Ujamaa. Working with Interfaith Action of Greater Saint Paul to house families in Project Home, providing learning and musical opportunities to our community for free. The realities of how we have used our power are amazing and enormous.

In times of transition, however, we can easily fall prey to the human tendency of loss aversion. We can become afraid of losing something because we have experienced loss—the loss of a beloved pastor and preacher, the loss of some members who can't bear to come to church without his presence, the loss of my predecessor.

In times of transition such as this we have to discern how we listen to the voice of Jesus telling us that we are not meant to preserve what has been built but to build our community, to be an even greater blessing.

Now if you're wise to the truth you'll point out that Jesus' use of power was such a threat to the powers that be that it got him killed. If we use our power as a congregation as Jesus calls us it will feel risky, be risky. It might threaten the powers that be.

A person using what they have to serve could lead to loss. Well, if we don't use it, we'll lose it anyway. And when Jesus lost it all to the powers of this world and was killed we need to build our faith on God's response—resurrection.

When we use our power to make the world that Jesus us calls us to build a reality we might lose it all. But God's response to such faith use of blessing, even to the point of death, is resurrection. New life! And is the power of that faith which frees this House of Hope not to be a community seeking to avoid loss but to understand that Jesus is, even now, building something better. This resurrection faith has seen this church through nearly 170 years of challenge and this faith, which drives out fear, which will lead us to discern where we are called to pour out our power next, is leading us into the world Jesus is building even now—which may not yet be of this world but which this world needs as desperately as ever.

Let us not seek to use our power in service to the fear of its loss. Let's use our power as Jesus calls us to use it; building a better, more beautiful, more just, church and world.