



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 11 – Proper 16 Year C

Power and Control

[RCL]: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Harvard Professor Hugh O’Doherty says that all conflict is about power and control, and in fact, a great deal of other human activity involves power and control in one way or another. Two of today’s scripture readings bear out this reality.

The gospel’s central issue focuses on the application of Sabbath rules – specifically whether it is forbidden to heal on the seventh day, the day of rest. Actually, ancient Sabbath restrictions did not include a ban on all work. For example, acting to save human life was a permitted exception. We might wonder about this detail: whether the compassionate act of Jesus healing the woman with a crippling spirit could have been understood as an acceptable form of work.

Nevertheless, such a technicality is not the essential point of this encounter between Jesus and religious authority. Rather, it is about power and control. It is really about the way the leader of the synagogue tried to use Sabbath rules to discredit Jesus, regardless of the good he had done. He made a power move over and against Jesus, as he indignantly and repeatedly insisted that Jesus was wrong in not waiting for another day to cure the woman.

Understandably, the synagogue leader felt threatened that he might lose control of his congregation and would probably be left with diminished power as a result. He ignored the benefit to the woman and employed a literal, self-serving interpretation of the law in an attempt to control Jesus and protect his own institution. This, of course, foreshadows grievous, even deadly, uses of power for control, demonstrated by Jewish persecution of early Christians described in the Book of Acts.

Today’s gospel clearly reveals the tendency for humans to resort to methods of power and control to achieve what they want or feel they need. It verifies an insight struck by Richard Rohr in *The Divine Dance*. He terms this “group narcissism” and says it “has nothing to do with love for God; it isn’t a search for truth or love. It’s a grasping for control, and *every* group at its less mature stages of development will try to put God into the pocket of its own-members-only jackets!” He contends that all religions do this – Jews, Christians of all sorts, and Muslims among them.

Rohr's assertion about group narcissism also seems to ring true in today's epistle, though in a non-physical use of power for control. Most scholars think Hebrews was written to dissuade recently converted Christians from returning to Judaism. Some think that in this particular passage he even twisted logic in order to make his argument. In any case, he tried to show that the Jewish view of God was clearly inferior to the God recognized by Christians through knowing Jesus. Given our understanding of God's self-revealing through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, this might make sense to us.

But understandable as this may be, for today's purposes we also see the underlying motivation of a defender of Christianity threatened with loss of the power of numbers; threatened by the loss of momentum by a rapidly growing body of the faithful and the fear of losing even more. Hebrews uses the power of persuasion in an effort to control whether individuals worshipped on Saturday or Sunday, at the synagogue or the Eucharist.

Furthermore, a review of church history reveals many instances in which power and control led to examples of group narcissism - sometimes in tragic detail. Group after group attempted to use ritualistic and legalistic power to gain control. This took place between the Roman Church of the west and the Orthodox Church of the east. It erupted in bloody wars between Protestants and Catholics. It continued in the verbal and political fights of Evangelicals and Liberals, High-Church and Low-Church factions; and Eucharistic-focused versus Confessional-based churches. If we look around today, we will see the effects of group narcissism as leaders attempt to use power to control others and "win" for their particular views of the faith.

The historic period of today's readings was certainly in the "less mature stage" of Christianity, as Rohr mentions, but this use of power for control obviously continues beyond that stage, as we have seen now for 2,000 years of the church's life. There is a natural tendency for us to maintain control of familiar institutions that support our priorities.

Admittedly, the use of power and control is not always bad. It can be an important self-protective mechanism when we are in harm's way or a way to produce justice and defend the helpless. Despite the fact that power can be used for good in other ways, we are called to resist negative use of power for control and rather to look to the model of Jesus for direction.

Today's tendency to center so much of our lives on power and control – especially in selfish ways – is as dangerous a trend as in any era. Sadly, we seldom dare to admit this truth within and among us. We repress it, cover it up, hide from it, ignore it, and sometimes are simply unaware that it is a part of what drives us.

For Christians, the bottom line about power and control is best understood in this way: its negative use, like that of the leader of the synagogue, is a function of power *over and against*. Whenever we use power over others in the absence of love, the action leaves us separated from God and the values of God. It denies access to God-given-ness within each of us. The leader of the synagogue attempted to preserve his

own power and control of the community by using the power of his authority and a literal expression of Sabbath law to dishonor and weaken Jesus and control those present so they would not follow a rival.

But the Gospel story also provides an example of the better way to use power. Today we witness Jesus acting out of compassion for the plight of the crippled woman and employing for her benefit the greatest power in the universe, the power of love. He used that power *for*, not against, not to control, but *to help and heal and give life*. Jesus used his power – the power of the Holy Spirit – the power of compassionate love - to heal the woman. This is the Jesus about whom St. Paul wrote in Philippians as the human Lord who did not misuse the power of God, did not exploit it with selfish purposes, but humbled himself in obedience to God – giving himself away, even unto death on a cross.

He drew a circle large enough so it would not exclude anyone or seek power against anyone. He used the power of love to unlock the God within each of us, a power through which we can follow him in giving ourselves away and caring for others.

Finally, this prayer is summarized in today's collect. In it, we look to the hopeful reality that God may enable us in the unity of the Spirit to show forth God's power of love among all people.

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