

## **POWER AND CONTROL**

*Sermon for Pentecost 29B, Christ the King: Jn 18: 33-37*

LPC, 11/2209

A few years ago I attended a training for community leaders. One of the most interesting sessions was about power. Many of the participants had become community leaders, or wanted to become community leaders, to advocate for the powerless against the powerful. It was remarkable how much we leaders identified with the disenfranchised, on whose behalf we wanted to work.

When asked the question, “Are you powerful?” most of us demurred. There were all kinds of reasons for this. We didn’t want to seem boastful. Or perhaps, we had so many negative associations with powerful people that we didn’t want to be identified with them.

Our teachers impressed upon us that this humility was indeed false. By being modest about our own powers we were selling ourselves short. Furthermore, we were actually letting down the poor and weak for whom we claimed to be advocating.

By declining to use our powers to the fullest, our teachers said, we create a power vacuum, into which other powers, economic powers, social powers, political powers, are more than happy to step. These forces are not shy about exerting *their* powers, and they act in amoral ways. These forces might not be intentionally evil, but then again, they might be.

Therefore, our teachers said (and all these teachers came from a background of faith), when we don’t claim and use the power that is rightfully ours, we are not reflecting Christ’s humility. We are being passive, possibly allowing amoral or malign powers to prevail.

There is a quotation that circulates widely on the internet, that supports this point of view. This quotation is widely attributed to Nelson Mandela’s inaugural speech, but in fact was written by Marianne Williamson, an internationally known author lecturer on spirituality and politics. The quote, from a book called *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles,"* (Harper Collins, 1992), goes as follows:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.' We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." (From Chapter 7, Section 3)

Now, it occurs to me that if many of us demur when it comes to claiming the power that is rightfully ours, we tend not to be so reticent when it comes to claiming control. It's an interesting distinction, isn't it? Power vs. control. I have yet to meet a human being who isn't at least sometimes hung up on the question of control. And the human drive to control may be the number one impediment to full relationship with God.

If we want a picture of a person who exercises power while passing the need to control, we can look at Jesus, who does have a full relationship with God the Father. Jesus is depicted exercising power left and right in the Bible: he heals disease, he stills a storm, we walk on water.

But nowhere is Jesus' power more exquisitely depicted than in the scene from John's Gospel where Jesus faces Pilate, the Roman procurator who has the power of life and death over Jesus. This story is an elegant portrayal of true power, represented by Jesus, facing down control, as represented by Pilate.

Pilate tries to verify that Jesus has claimed to be King of the Jews. To claim to be any kind of king would be a threat to the security of the Roman Empire, and would therefore be punishable by death. Jesus answers that his kingdom is not of this world. This throws Pilate for a loop, so he decides to concentrate on the word "king." Has Jesus claimed to be a king or not? Jesus playfully remarks that in the way Pilate has phrased his question, he has actually said the words, "You are a king." Jesus then says that he, Jesus, is testifying to the truth, and implies that only those who recognized the truth will acknowledge Jesus as king. After this circuitous argument, Pilate is ready to give up. This excerpt omits Pilate's exasperated response: "What is truth?"

Jesus, in chains, is clearly freer than Pilate, with all Pilate's responsibilities. Jesus has the power in this exchange. He won't play Pilate's game, but he never descends to game playing or fear or anger or arrogance. He stands for the truth. He stands for himself. I have always felt that in this exchange Jesus loves Pilate. Jesus seems to be inviting Pilate, recognizing Pilate's thirst for truth and saying, in a subtext, "I am the truth you seek! Come with me!"

I perceive that Pilate is tempted. Pilate sees something in Jesus that he cannot name: perhaps he is afraid to name. But Pilate will not, cannot let himself respond to Jesus' invitation. He represents the Roman Empire! He represents Law and Order and merciful rule! Roman officials don't treat with itinerant Jewish towel-heads. It isn't done. Pilate holds back from Jesus. *He has to remain in control.*

In what ways do we hold back from Jesus? In what ways does our need from control keep us from saying yes to God? In what ways do we lay down the power that God gives us because it's too scary? In what ways do we cling to control, because to relinquish control is too scary? But what could we accomplish if, like Jesus, we chose to exercise power without seeking control?