



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

1309 R Street * Lincoln, NE 68508 * (402) 474-1979 * www.stmarks-episcopal.org

The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for Good Friday
St. Mark's on the Campus
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“DO you not realize that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” I have power, Pilate asserts to Jesus. This after we hear just moments earlier that Pilate is “more afraid than ever” – afraid because he has been told that Jesus has claimed to be the Son of God, that he has a special relationship with someone more powerful than Pilate himself.

We can understand how in such a circumstance, Pilate – full of fear and insecurity -- he could easily find himself asserting his *own* power, in an effort to reassure *himself* more than anyone else. “Do you not realize that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Pilate’s assertion of his power doesn’t faze Jesus; it certainly doesn’t raise fear in his heart as Pilate no doubt hopes it will, so that Jesus will answer his question.

Power and fear. John weaves them throughout his version of Jesus’ passion. Fear is often called the opposite of faith. *Peter’s* fear – his lack of trust in God – causes him first to draw his sword and attack a slave and then later to lie about his close relationship to Jesus. *Pilate’s* fear leads him to turn Jesus over to the crowd, even though he wants to release him. Apparently to Pilate, the crowd seems to have the greater power at the moment – greater than the God of Jesus, so Pilate chooses to throw his lot in with the crowd.

Apparent power counts for a lot in this story. It takes a lot of trust on Jesus’ part not to go with the *apparent* power in the situation. And although in John’s gospel Jesus carries his cross by himself, he is not alone on this journey of faith. Joseph of Arimathea reflects some of Jesus’ own trust. We’re told that before the crucifixion Joseph had been a *secret* disciple -- because of his fear.

But now – at the moment of greatest vulnerability -- Joseph goes directly to Pilate, the one who has used the power he has to turn Jesus over to be crucified. Pilate is driven by fear, not trust, and so Joseph places himself at some risk in identifying himself with Jesus and asking Pilate for Jesus’ body. But fear is no longer driving *Joseph’s* actions; he’s no longer a “secret” follower of Jesus. He’s completely open about his discipleship and places himself before Pilate because of it.

The women at the foot of the cross also become vulnerable followers of Jesus as they gather at the foot of the cross, along with Jesus’ mother, Mary, and the disciple whom Jesus loves. They, too, show considerable trust in God in their willingness to be right there at the cross, the most vulnerable of all places to be at the moment.

How much of *your* life is driven by fear of what might happen -- and how much by trust in God no matter what happens? Are you more like Joseph and the women at the foot of the cross this day -- or more like Peter and Pilate? In what truth do you place *your* trust -- in *apparent* power or in the *real* power of *God* as we know it in Jesus as he hangs on the cross? Or is it, as it is for most of us, a mixture of the two?

We all live in relationships of power. Parents and children, for example. Parents have the power in that relationship for a long time. It grows more subtle over time but some dynamic of it exists all of our lives. For some of us, the power shifts in a dramatic way, and our children have considerable power over our physical care as we get older, even determining when that plug is finally pulled. Those of us with aging parents know that the power and influence we have is sometimes quite complicated and always calls for more than what *we* think is best if we are going to serve them in the spirit of the cross.

Of course that's true in all relationships in which power is a dynamic, not just parents and children. Teachers and students. Bosses and employees. God and the world. It's the astounding irony of this day that we look upon a cross with the body of Jesus upon it and see how God uses power incomparable to any other power. God uses power to heal breaches. To reconcile. To forgive. To love. And to love some more. To love to the end.

For Christians, *God's* use of power is the measuring stick to evaluate all other uses of power, beginning with our own. Where do we use the power we have in relationship to each other to bring about healing and reconciliation and greater love? Where are we using our power to "strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being," as we promise to do in our baptismal covenant? Where do we love to the end because we are driven by our deep and abiding trust in God? And where are we driven by fear, trusting primarily in ourselves and in our own power as individuals and as human beings? Granted, the power we have can sometimes be quite awesome. We should never underestimate it. Look what it does at the cross. But nor should we overestimate our power and think that it's as great as the power of God, the power to love to the end, the *real* power in which we are called to trust and to participate.

As Paul writes to the Corinthians: "The message of the cross is . . . the power of God. . . . We proclaim Christ crucified . . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor. 1: 18ff.)

It takes a lot of grace to trust in the love of the cross. Even with the immeasurable grace of Christ, we sometimes fail miserably at that trust. We pound our own nails deep into the flesh and blood of Jesus, and of each other.

And so we repent, and we turn again to the cross, where there is healing, and there is forgiveness; where we are brought once again into the fullness of that family that trusts in the power of God manifested in the cross of Jesus Christ; where we serve one another and the world for which Jesus turned over his life. And where we are loved. Loved to the end.

Amen.