

8.24.25 Pentecost 11

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Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Let us begin with prayer. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

The sermon today is based on our Gospel reading. The title of the sermon is “Power and Control”.

For those of you who have or have had children, here is a scenario. It’s a lovely day, the children are busy playing out in the yard but you have some errands that have to be done. You call them to come into the house, wash their hands and get ready to go out. Then you call again.

You call a third time – this time using their whole names, including middle names to indicate that you are serious. This time you get some verbal response and complaining that they are in the middle of something. Frustrated, you yell, “Come in here now!” The answer is “Why?” And, in the words of parents through the ages you reply “Because I said so!”

Control. It has a place in our world. We use it to keep our children safe when we set boundaries before they are able to do that for themselves. We try to control aspects of our lives – our environment, our style of living, our relationships, the route we take to work, for heaven’s sake!

But there is also the control that others have over us. There are laws to keep us safe, “rules of the road”, guidelines and guard rails that ensure local and national government, ability to vote, safety nets for people who have fallen on hard times or simply need a hand for medical bills or heat in the cold months. And then there is the control exerted over those who have no power – are at the mercy of “the system” who don’t have the money or the connections to ensure their safety or their rights.

Let’s look at today’s Gospel through the lens of that second type of control.

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. That might make us wonder about this specific incident - whether the compassionate act of Jesus healing the woman with a crippling spirit could have been understood as an acceptable form of work.

However, the “letter of the law” is not the main point of this confrontation between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue. It is really about power and control. The leader of the synagogue is trying to use the Sabbath rules to discredit Jesus – disregarding the good that Jesus had done in healing the woman. Even though he, himself, could not have healed her. We also don’t know if the synagogue had done anything in the prior years to make her life easier. I think it’s pretty obvious that the leader felt threatened by the actions of Jesus and may have been concerned that

the congregation would think less of him and his power over the community would be diminished.

He totally ignored the benefit to the woman and applied a strict and one could say a self-serving interpretation of the law in an attempt to secure his own position and control Jesus. Of course we know that this foreshadows the deadly use of power for control that led to the crucifixion of Jesus and the Jewish persecution of early Christians as described in the Book of Acts.

Today's gospel clearly reveals the tendency for people 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.

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, 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.

This use of power for control has continued for 2,000 years of the church's life. There is a natural tendency for us to want to maintain control of familiar institutions that support our priorities.

Now, to be sure, 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.

For Christians, the bottom line about power and control is best understood 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 the God light 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 today's Gospel shows us a better way to use power. Today we witness Jesus acting out of compassion for the plight of the crippled woman and using 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.

Who gives his very self to us today in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Jesus drew a circle large enough so it would not exclude 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. Amen