

Powerful Service

April 09, 2020

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

When I was child, one of my greatest aspirations was to be a superhero as an adult. I watched “He-Man and the Masters of the Universe,” seeing how this scrawny prince just had to lift a sword above his head and say, “I have the power” to get a body that could win the “World’s Strongest Man” competition. I watched the Power Rangers, Superman, Batman, and all these other superheroes, dreaming of being this mountain of muscle that could defeat any monsters or villains that came my way. To me, “power” meant “physical strength.” This however did not last long.

As I got older, I realized that superheroes weren’t real and that even if they were, I’d have to exercise to get that physically fit, which, I didn’t like exercising. So, those dreams went away rather quickly. Plus, with age came a new definition of power: money. Politicians have the power to make and remove laws. Movie and music stars have the power to influence what is “cool” for generations to come not only in regards to what is listened to or watched, but what the newest slang is, how to dress, how to treat others verbally and physically, etc. Doctors and lawyers have the power to greatly affect a person’s life in one way or another. CEOs have the power to do whatever they want whenever they want. So, I thought to myself, what do all these people have in common? The answer: money. They all are in positions where they can pay bills, taxes, mortgages, and still have massive amounts of money left over. In my adolescent eyes, these people were the ones with the real power in this world. This definition of power, though, comes to a grinding halt once religion is entered into the mix, a lesson we read in today’s reading.

In today’s Bible reading, Jesus has at this point entered into Jerusalem and is on the cusp of being arrested, tried, and executed. In the eyes of the disciples, Jesus is not only a teacher but a master. He is a person with power, not only in the sense of making miracles happen but also in regards to influencing everyone he meets. They are now gathered around the table and are sharing a meal together. During this meal, Jesus begins washing their feet, a job designated for the slaves and servants, not for the one hosting the meal, the “master of the house” as it were. This creates something of a conundrum for the disciples. They are surprised and probably a little bit uncomfortable with Jesus’ actions. Peter even voices his concern, saying, “You will never wash my feet.” In other words, Peter is voicing his discomfort with allowing Jesus to lower himself to the level of the servant and to perform such a menial task as foot washing. This however is the message Jesus is trying to get across.

Bear in mind, at this point in time, as with the modern day, those in positions of authority, those who have money, these are the people who are viewed as having “power.” These are the people with whom you stay on their good side for fear of what would happen if you upset them. People didn’t object to the religious leaders and the Pharisees because they had power. People didn’t rise up against the Roman Empire because Caesar and his governors had power. People revered and envied the rich because they had power. Now Jesus turns this definition of power on its head. Just as the servants and slaves wash the guests’ feet, now Jesus, a person of power, washes his disciples’ feet. Just as the servants and slaves serve the food, so

too does Jesus break the bread and pour out the wine, then serving it to his disciples. Jesus here makes a very distinct separation between our earthly kingdoms and the Kingdom of God. On Earth, our objective is to “climb the ladder,” to gain that higher and higher rank so that we might gain greater and greater power. Our society rewards our extensive studies, experience, and contributions with titles, higher pay, higher positions, and rewards, medals, etc. that really spruce up our resumés, that really make us look powerful in the eyes of the general populous. The Kingdom of God, though, it rewards those who willingly lower themselves in service to others. Why is this, though?

The reason those who humble themselves for others’ sakes are exalted and seen as leaders, as those with power, is tied into another piece of this passage. After Jesus has washed their feet and fed them, Jesus then gives them a new commandment: “Love one another just as I have loved you.” Bear in mind, this love that Jesus has shown to them has been in service to them, not in rewarding their service to him. An additional message then of this passage is “to serve is to love.” As Jonathan Walton writes, “Love demands that we stretch beyond the boundaries of comfort to attend to the needs of others. Jesus thus models the mores of God’s kingdom by performing an act otherwise reserved for servants or the enslaved.” To love others is to be in service to others, something Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of in his address “The Drum Major Instinct”: “Everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve . . . You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.”

So, we return then to the question, what is it to be powerful? This story invites us to reconsider power as it relates to love. “Love” is where power is at, and to love is to serve. Therefore, to serve is to have power. Jesus, the most powerful human to walk this earth, had a heart that overflowed with love for not just his friends and family, but his enemies and those he didn’t know from Adam. He had the power to make all manner of thing happen, and he used that power in service to all those he met, expecting nothing in return besides the opportunity to show his love for them. As his followers, his modern-day disciples, we are given this same commandment that he gives his own disciples at the Last Supper: “to love others as we have been loved,” and therein, to serve as we have been served. Now, I realize that might not be the easiest, given that so many places are shut down and many of us are afraid to leave our homes for fear of catching COVID-19. However, we can still donate our excess money to causes that support and serve those less fortunate than us. We can still buy extra cans of food, extra boxes of pasta, extras of what’s on our grocery list as a whole and give it to the local food pantry or soup kitchen, that they might serve those less fortunate than us. In short, to serve is to love, and to love is to have power. Therefore, to serve is to have power. So, I ask: How powerful are you?