

Pentecost 18, Proper 20
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

September 22, 2024
Rev. Paul Moore

This coming Saturday, starting at 11:30, we will host an event here in the Parish Hall. Designed to help us build working relationships across cultures, members of Resurrección are inviting members of St. Paul's to join them for lunch, only the lunch will be prepared together, eaten together, and then cleaned up after together. I am hoping we create a place where neither Hispanic nor Anglo world-views dominate, but a combination of both, a third sort of place in the middle, where everyone keeps something important, even as they give up something. We have planned it for 11:30-1 to accommodate those of us who would like to be at the ribbon cutting at the new library complex at 10. Please do come, it should be fun.

More than being just fun, I hope it is an exercise in negotiated power. Power is an interesting thing. We all have it, to one degree or another. It is nuanced in a hundred ways: power earned, power attributed, power conferred, and power taken, to name a few. Where we need people to exercise power in our communities, power corrupts, and ultimate power corrupts ultimately. In one sense it's always playing with fire.

The Bible has a lot to say about power. The lesson from Sacred History this morning, refers to quite a difficult time for Israel. Babylon had conquered Israel, taking power over the nation and turning it into a vassal state in their growing empire. The sovereignty so central to the "Golden Age" of King David, was lost. Where was God's promise to Israel to protect and provide? Where was God's promise that the Hebrews were God's chosen people? A lot of people had a lot of ideas, mostly that God will vanquish the infidels and return Israel to its rightful sovereignty, which was politically very popular. Jeremiah had a different explanation. Israel had violated the covenant it had with God, and this was the consequence—not a popular message—so unpopular, in fact, that his life was threatened. What does this have to do with power? Babylon had taken power by military force. Jeremiah had conferred power by being the mouthpiece of the Almighty. One is driven by ego, the other by surrender. In the passage, Jeremiah appeals to God for protection. *"You got me into this, you get me out!"*

The lesson from the Apostolic Instruction is similar. The author of the epistle of James makes it very clear. Envy and selfish ambition only get us into trouble, but a gentle wisdom works the works of God. Envy and selfish ambition are ego driven, of a piece with murder and war. Gentle wisdom is spirit-driven, surrendered to the voice of God.

The Gospel Lesson really lays it out, though. Jesus begins to predict his death—and resurrection quite openly, but the disciples don't understand. Actually, I don't think they were paying attention. They were arguing about who was the greatest among them. Now, here is the one who said that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friend. He has just said he was about to do that, undergo the ultimate surrender of power—death—for their sake. Jesus' power is not ego-driven, it is spirit driven, but they are on another wavelength, that of ego and power. *"Who is the greatest among us? I'm bigger than you! No, I'm bigger than you!"* Jesus never misses a teachable moment!

“You want to be great in the Kingdom, then serve the lowest. You want to be important, then make others important.”

Power is upside down in the Kingdom. It's not ego-driven, it is spirit driven—that is to say, driven by love.

We're in an election year. There's a lot flying around about power. Each candidate is vowing to set the economy straight, fix our borders, etc. The problem is, we don't have a monarchy. These people are making promises based on their power to influence others. They really don't have the final say on any of it. In fact, I was speaking with a professional financial adviser a while back who admitted that presidents don't really have that much power over the economy. The border issue is a bit different, but in the end, fiat from the White House have limited reach or effect. After all, walls don't keep anybody out or in. Politics, it seems, does not quickly reward spirit-driven power. We seem bent on electing the one who promises to use their power to help us, our little group, our little tribe, our little community—even at the expense of others.

Believers cannot get caught up in that. Who serves the most? Who gives the most? Who is willing to lay down their power for the sake of others? These are the drivers of the Gospel idea of power.

Power is not only exercised in politics. The very fact that White Anglo culture is dominant in this country gives every White person in this room right now power that those who do not share that culture do not have. It's attributed power, not earned or conferred. It's just the way things are. Our dominant ethnocentric view creates the world the United States works in. In and of itself, this is not a moral issue. It's when it is used, often subconsciously, to treat minority members as less than full humans that we run into trouble. It's when we let our ethnocentrism drive a communal selfishness that we justify violence, like claiming that Haitian immigrants are eating pets. The secondary and tertiary effects can be alarming, as we have seen in the news.

Here at St. Paul's, we are hosts to another congregation who live in another ethnic worldview. Theirs is a minority; ours the majority. We own the building; they pay rent. They must come to us for major decisions that involve building use, service times, and other things. Most poignantly, they are not included in those decision-making circles. Now, we are generous, almost to a fault, and we love to have them here, and you all love my stories of life in Latin America, but we are not sharing power here. We are exercising power over them while Jesus tells us that the greatest are those who serve.

The merger we are contemplating would address exactly that issue. It would include them in the circles of power. It would expand our family to include our guests.

I will be the first to admit that it is a hard thing to do. Ethnocentrism is a strong force, and it operates mostly unconsciously. You don't know you've been there until you run into it with people who are other. It's like one's ego, that assumes that we are the center of the world, until we run into the needs of someone we love and are forced to choose!

Perhaps the most challenging thing that a merger requires is a change in how we see ourselves. Are we a dominant-culture congregation who graciously hosts a minority one? Or are we a multicultural congregation with two cultural expressions? Will ethnocentrism define us, or will self-giving love?

The famous priest, theologian and paleontologist, Pierre de Chardin said, “Love is the most universal, formidable and mysterious of cosmic energies,” “the very blood stream of spiritual evolution” (Teilhard, *Building the Earth*, 45, 49) For de Chardin, the force of love is the move away from separation toward union, and that union is at once union with God and union with one another. The website of the Center for Christogenesis, dedicated to his work and thought, it unpacks those statements.

Those who fall in love participate in an adventure that began about 14 billion years ago. They enter into a relationship that will survive and flourish only if they embrace a life of perpetual discovery and strive to surmount the obstacles to greater growth that are sure to assail them.

How powerful is our love? How spirit-driven our power?