

6th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.1.18
Scripture:

Lamentations 3:22-33

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.²⁷ It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth,²⁸ to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it,²⁹ to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope),³⁰ to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults.³¹ For the Lord will not reject forever.³² Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;³³ for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

What interests me in this story is the transfer of power from Jesus to the woman with the menstrual flow, which had lasted twelve years. Jesus felt it, power going forth from him. The woman felt afraid of having done it, having drained power from him which, upon his asking about it, “Who touched my clothes?” had her come to him in fear and trembling and had her fall down before him to tell “the whole truth.” I’m interested in her assumption that this transfer of power from him to her, from the Christ to the ritually (and tragically) unclean, would be assumed as an offense, a violation.

Of *course* the one with all the power would want not to lose any of that power. That’s the way of power and the powerful, right?

There are lots of things about this story that interest me less, having now preached on this several times, though they *are* worth pointing out: that there’s craft about it, which our gospel writer, “Mark,” likely intended, that Mark presents a double story, a story wrapped in a story, which is typical of this book and which then features some noteworthy doubles.

Both situations of crisis had central to them a daughter, one an actual daughter, that of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, and the other a woman whom Jesus would call “daughter.” And this is likely suggestive of, many commentators conclude, Jesus as one who’d hold as a central concern people who had no expectation that they would ever be anyone’s central concern: daughters, girls, women. A people who needed physical protection and care, a people who cost as much as they brought benefit, a people who often died doing the very thing they were created to do, namely give birth, women were never central, at least not systematically, because they were just too much work—except to Jesus, except to Jairus who *loved* his daughter, except to Mark whose crafting of this story would have us know, girls too!

But, no, because really, patriarchy just makes so much more sense, power granted to those who could physically defend it or, falling short of that, wouldn’t come with the possibility of, having been physically overpowered (as would happen in war or in a broken-down society), bearing the shameful evidence of that nine months later. Men just make more practical sense. As for women: too vulnerable, too costly, they were just too much.

Underscoring this suggestion, though, that women and girls might also be central to this Jesus project is the fact that both daughters bore the significant number, twelve. The actual

daughter was twelve years old when she'd now died, and the woman called "daughter" had suffered a continuous menstrual flow for twelve years, which would have deprived her of normal participation in her community while also depriving her of all money. The story does, let's remember, note that she had spent all she had on physicians, but none of them had actually helped. So now she was doubly out: poor and unclean. Each of them, then, bearing this divine number suggests something—something about their importance though contrary to social convention.

Okay to all that. What really interests me, though, about this "pericope" is the transfer of power, the free flow of it from one *powerful* to one *powerless*, and moreover the assumption that this would present as a problem to the one who, holding power, lost some of it, and that the one who gained a bit of it would now have cause to fear—having what she didn't deserve! *Having* what she wouldn't even know what to do with!

This past week has been apocalyptic, if you ask me, a stripping away of all illusions, norms, social convention. It's been to me a quite horrifying revelation that this whole thing has been about a consolidation of power. Over the past few years, over the past few decades, a meeting of minds that those with power would arrange flows, or fail to defend limits, so they'd enjoy an evermore increase and consolidation of power.

I'm not alone in my horror and heartbreak. Lili Loofbourow wrote it better than I could, in an article for *Slate Magazine*. Spurred by the news of Justice Kennedy retiring and thus giving Mr. Trump a second turn at a Supreme Court pick, galling for so many reasons, she writes: "That decision [of Kennedy's] empowers a reality-television star who lost the popular vote by millions to reform the Supreme Court for at least a generation—a court that rather than rebut his claim to power has affirmed it." Considering how those whom this president nominates for positions of power become some of his staunchest defenders, she even contemplates whether filling this second open seat will cut the last tether on his power, the Russia investigation. She writes, "Trump has said he will pardon himself if he needs to, a controversial stance that would likely need approval from the high court. Now he has been given a way to assure it. He holds the power over the person who can rubber-stamp him into invulnerability."

This "capitulation," she claims, "of two branches of government to a terrifying third, elected by a minority, is not how our government was envisioned...and the problem isn't simply

that Trump—who styles himself a ‘law and order’ president—values neither [law nor order]... It’s that he shouts about law and order while upholding the immunity of the rich and the cruel. He pardoned Joe Arpaio, [thus interrupting the sentencing portion of due process] who tortured undocumented immigrants in unlivable tent cities he openly called concentration camps, and, in pardoning Dinesh D’Souza, has signaled he will pardon his cronies if they are convicted for illegally helping him.”

With little in the situation to hope for, Ms. Loofbourow admits that it least now there’s clarity. “There is no more equivocating to do,” she explains. “You don’t have to equivocate about Trump’s corruption—or Wilbur Ross’s, or Scott Pruitt’s. You don’t have to parse whether a ‘falsehood’ is really a ‘lie.’ It is simply true that the president is corrupt and that his supporters celebrate his corruption, that twisted power has enfeebled the institutions which depend on the very things the president would call weak—honesty and honor and service.”

Meanwhile, “confused by the fever that’s seized it, the country has spent days debating the ‘civility’ of a restaurant owner who [quietly, *civilly*] asked Sarah Huckabee Sanders to leave,” she whose mockery of the press whom she’s supposed to answer to is a daily offense. But as for Trump, Ms. Loofbourow recalls for us that “he called sitting members of Congress ‘crazy,’ [routinely calls the press the enemy of the people,] pettily insulted the same restaurant’s cleanliness” yet is one whose own discourse “somehow doesn’t factor into this earnest discussion of civility...”

“Even more shocking, though, is that this impulse to cordon Trump off, either by forgiving or excepting him, has extended to the courts, where language *must* matter if the institution is to function. In upholding Trump’s ban on travel from Muslim-majority countries...the Supreme Court dismissed his many, many public statements that declared an intent to discriminate based on religion.” But these same justices did the exact opposite in the Masterpiece Cakeshop case, citing evidence, as they did, that some members of the Colorado Civil Rights Commission expressed “bias” against the baker’s religious belief. So which is it? Does extra-situation commentary express intent or does it not? Because when it comes to “law and order” you can’t have it both ways.

“The result is that Trump,” now Ms. Loofbourow, “a man who has repeatedly said that he only responds to consequences, has faced none. His lies meet with no institutional resistance. Quite the contrary, his decision to say outrageous, incorrect, inflammatory things has paid off

handsomely. His supporters believe them, and those in power will not acknowledge that he has said anything at all. The combined effect has rendered him immune to every standard we, as a country, once shared.

“The word *hypocrisy* bobs up in these discussions,” she notes, but more and more this doesn’t seem like the right line of critique because those who are “failing us [don’t appear to] aspire to intellectual or moral consistency in the first place. There is no negotiating with, or appeasing, or even engaging a party that feels no responsibility to the truth. Lying is more than ‘uncivil.’ It corrodes relationships and trust...”

The beneficiaries of all this, then, are those who already held power, and now have evermore. And I’ll admit I’m put in mind of the explanation O’Brien offers for his motivations in the book *1984*: “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power. [Other authoritarianisms] pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?”

Oh, God. Yes, I do.

Likewise, Ms. Loofbourow understands, “it will never be enough for them. The good-faith ideological battle some thought right and left were waging turned out to be no such thing. Modern conservatism was never about small government, or personal liberty—not for women and people of color, anyway. It wasn’t about fiscal responsibility”—no, for our national debt is now projected to be, by the end of the year, the highest it’s been since 1950. And of this situation, those in governing power will claim it’s a crisis, yet with no regard for their having created it; and they’ll urge “sacrifices,” which will come home to the poor and vulnerable, as we gut services they desperately need, like health care and food assistance.

So now we see, theirs is “a greed not just for wealth but for domination... which Trump recently revealed, boasting in a speech to his supporters, ‘We have more money and more brains

and better houses and apartments and nicer boats, “We are the elites,” he concluded to applause, though it’s hard to believe those applauding will feel so elite once the rally is over—which might be why they keep having rallies. They themselves probably don’t have “more money” and “nicer boats” but they at least can approximate themselves with someone who does.

So that’s what this is about: power, domination.

I don’t get it. I don’t get the appeal of it—but maybe because I’ve never had access enough to it that I would fall under its thrall.

I don’t get the appeal of heroin either, but I’ve never tried it.

Power is the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events. And I get the appeal of that. I *feel* a will to that, as Nietzsche philosophized I would, as he philosophized we all would—which isn’t nearly the cynical thing it’s become in the hands of sloppy thinkers like Hitler and other Nazis. The will to power is merely the drive to have an influence on your environment. And it can be pro-social, as we learn to sublimate our basic functioning to a higher order of being.

The will to power can be a discipline, like schooling for those who want to function professionally in society, or like parenting that would have you go up against the self-involved tantrums of your children on a daily basis, which is exhausting—but someone in the household has to have the power and it better not be the four-year-old (or the fourteen-year-old). The will to power can express itself in community organizing to get healthy lunches in the public schools or to clean up the neighborhood park or to insist that the Supreme Court be in service of justice rather than consolidated power. I wonder if the work of recovery as happens at Gould Farm is an expression of a healthy will to power: that mental illness not dominate in people’s lives, but be incorporated into them as merely one factor. The woman with the hemorrhage: she showed literal, and admirable, will to power, in spite of a whole society that essentially told her, “Don’t you dare.”

And for most of us, of course, our will to power will have its checks: we might exercise greater power in a certain environment but lesser power in another environment. Really, few of us will have access to unfettered power. And when any of us do, God help us all. We can’t count on those who do to turn away from that. Power is just too appealing, too enthralling.

So here we are.

God help us all.

It seemed like a good Sunday for Lamentations, which the lectionary did have in store for us this morning—this prophetic voice from when all society had collapsed in warring ruin, this lamenting voice which, in speaking, was revealed to have nothing to say but psalmic confessions, desperate chants: “The Lord is my portion. I will hope in him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

Maybe now is a good time for mantras that soothe, inspire, empower,

Maybe now is also a good time for images or dynamic understandings that help us go forth in hope.

I’ve said in the past that I love Mark’s understanding and presentation of Jesus, I just don’t know how to follow him.

Jesus, according to Mark, had such immediate effect, had an almost magical effect on the world around him. The presence of God was so absolute in him that all not-of-God couldn’t tolerate his being close, his having come in. His power flowed out of him like that woman’s power flowed out of her, and depleting as each might have been to the host, the effect his had on his environment was as evident as the effect hers would have had, though to her shame. Her flow kept her an outcast; his flow gathered crowds—until, that is, they’d in effect have traded places, him ashamed on the cross and her restored to full standing in her community. And I love that understanding of him—absolute presence, immediate light amidst otherwise darkness, absolute power outpouring that it might find equilibrium in the world, everyone having enough of it in order to be free.

I just don’t know how to do it myself, not in any grand sense.

But perhaps in the minute, in the moment-to-moment...

Look for your power this week, and I will mine. Hold this gospel dynamic in mind this week, this month, and try to do it yourself. These coming months and years, keep watchful of where you have power in store, and then be ready to spend it down, that you might even be left depleted. Spend it down where it’s most worthily spent for good, for the kingdom of God, which is justice and peace.

I’ll do it too. I promise.

Thanks be to God.