



Sermon

March 28, 2010
Palm / Passion Sunday
Luke 23:1-49 / Philippians 2: 5-11
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Power or Authority?

What's the difference between power and authority?

Stripped of all the awe, devotion and liturgical traditions arising from the tales of Jesus arrest, abandonment by his friends, the trials, getting roughed up, beat up, taunted, nailed to a cross, labeled King of the Jews, innocent man executed, breathing his last, never sayin' a mumblin' word – stripped of our comfortable discomfort with the long readings for another Palm/Passion Sunday, stripped of all our preconceived notions about who killed Jesus and why, at bare bones, the passion of Jesus is a story about power and authority.

Arrested by religious leaders, Jesus is hauled before Gov. Pilate. What do you see, power or authority? Pilate plays politics. Herod is happy for the limelight and passes the buck back to Pilate while soldiers tune Jesus up. Is that power or authority? The mob changes Pilate's political mind. Is that power or authority? Pilate orders Jesus execution. Is that power or authority? Beside him on the cross a thief pleads and Jesus promises paradise. Is that power or authority? An innocent man, the Son of God gives his life when he could have called a thousand angels. Is that power or authority?

What's the difference between power and authority?

Students of the dynamics of power say power carries with it the ability to coerce. For example, when the Philadelphia Parking Authority gives me a ticket I pay the ticket right away. I DO NOT want to pay the ticket. It

aggravates me to have to pay the ticket but I pay the ticket because the Philadelphia Parking Authority has power. I've watched the Parking Wars, I've heard from people who came to where the spot where they'd innocently left their car only to return to an empty space and directions to the impound lot. I do not want to yield to the Philadelphia Parking Authority, but I do because the Philadelphia Parking Authority has power – the power to tow my car, lock it away, then double, triple or quadruple the fine. The knowledge they will do these things is coercion and their coercion make me obedient. That's Power 101. Don't call them the Philadelphia Parking Authority, call them the Philadelphia Parking POWER!

Authority is different. My mother had great authority over me. Not power. Authority. She was smaller than me. A soft touch. I could have taken her in a fist fight. One hand tied behind my back. But when she spoke, even in the frailty of her last years, I listened and obeyed because she had authority. How did she get this authority? By the thousands of sacrificial things she did for me – how she did without many times so my brother and I would NOT be without things, how she went to work so I wouldn't have to pay for college myself. And more. Her loving sacrifices earned her authority.

I came across a story that illustrates what I mean by authority. 1984, Hamburg Pa. (near Reading) the political powers- that-be got wind St. Patrick's church wanted to hand over an unused convent so a few sisters could open a soup kitchen and shelter. The local politicians began to get irate

calls from the townspeople upset with the project. (What do you call townspeople from Hamburg? Hamburgers?) The town hall couldn't hold all the people who came to yell and scream their opposition to the "undesirables" and "crazies" who'd be coming to their neighborhood.

The zoning board and the city council voted unanimously against the nun's proposal. Slam dunk. But what the poor council people didn't know was these particular nuns were members of The Sisters of Charity, as in Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity. And it just so happened that Mother Teresa herself was in Pennsylvania at the time.

To everyone's surprise, not long after the townspeople voted HELL NO on the shelter, Mother Teresa in the flesh – the shrimpy, centered-in-God, no-nonsense, feisty, fearless mini-nun – came through the door, down the aisle and knelt in front of the stately council tables. "In the name of Jesus, make room for these children of God," she said. "When you reject them you reject Jesus." Raising her arms she pleaded, "Please, please, please, in the name of God make room for these people in your neighborhood."

Now what do you do if you're on the Hamburg City Council? TV cameras are rolling, reporters are taking notes and names, and Mother Teresa prostrate in front of you. What happens? The gavel bangs. "I move we change the decision." Then, "Second!" Then, "All in favor?" Unanimous.

The lawyer representing the nuns said the atmosphere in the room changed into Palm Sunday in reverse, everyone cheering and hooting when moments before they'd stood for NO WAY! GET OUT OF TOWN! Why the change? How? Because Mother Teresa was recognized as one with authority. Where did she get this authority? For starters, by walking into the Council meeting with her Sisters, having trudged through the snow in sandals and bare feet. Where did the authority come from? The streets and alleys of the poorest places in the world, where Mother Teresa and her Sisters of Charity routinely give themselves to meet the needs of others sacrificially. Sacrificial love

earned Mother Teresa authority. One councilman even said his bad back got cured just being in the same room with her.

Power or authority? When the church or institutions or families or you and I speak with authority people listen. The key is in being sacrificial. That's what we see in Jesus at Palm/Passion Sunday. Not just one who sacrifices life FOR US merely paying the debts for all our sin, weakness and failing like so much cash on the barrel, done deal, thank God I'm going to heaven. But as giving his life for us, showing how to live a life deeply centered in God, in unity with God's calling in the world, so in sync with God that he can do no other. When Jesus or anyone speaks with such authority they don't have to resort to power.

Jesus resorted to authority, not power. In the Gospels you hear people saying over and over, Jesus spoke with "authority," often to the amazement of hearers because he didn't talk the typical God talk or religious speak. And here's why, according to Paul in today's reading from Philippians: Jesus emptied himself of power:

He [Jesus] had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of status. (He gave up power.) ... When the time came, he set aside the privileges of a god and took on the status of a slave, became human... a humbling process... a selfless, obedient life and then a selfless and obedient death ... the worst kind crucifixion. (He gained authority.) Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone of anything... Philippians 2:5-11, The Message

"Let THIS mind be in you..." says Paul in words that speak to the church or institutions or families or individuals. "Think of yourself as Jesus thought of himself," is how the contemporary language translations put it. Turning away from power leads to authority.

Way back at the beginning of Lent we heard the story of Jesus tempted in the wilderness. "Turn these stones into bread," Satan says tempting Jesus with the power of having the all the right

stuff to survive. Satan speaks power, economic power. Jesus says NO.

"C'mon jump of the pinnacle of the Temple, You're a miracle man. You are always gonna land on your feet." Satan speaks tempting religious power, putting God at the end of Jesus' leash. Jesus says NO.

Up even higher, on a mountaintop, "Jesus, look at all the kingdoms and powers of the world. Say the word. They're yours," Satan says, tempting Jesus to political power and control. NO, says Jesus. I don't want economic power. I don't want religious power. I don't want political power. I want change-the-world-by-sacrificial-love power, sacrificial love for the outsider, outcast, the poor in things and the poor in spirit. The more sacrifice and love, the more evidence of what it means to live a life deeply centered in God. The more deeply centered in God, the more God shows through me. The more God shows through me, the more authority I have. That's what changes lives. That's what changes the world.

Bishop Thomas Neely and the precious few left at St. George's – an almost dead church in the 1920's – didn't have political power when the powers-that-be said this church had to come down to make way for a Delaware River bridge. But here we are, now we are "the church that moved a bridge."

Mahatma Gandhi didn't have political power. He never commanded the courts or an army. But he helped a nation be reborn.

Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. didn't have political power. Matter of fact, they often felt the powers of government— night-stick swinging, mace-spraying, growling-dog holding police, fire hose-shooting fire fighters using all their forces against them. But Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. changed this country to mean what we say about the blessing of "freedom and justice for all."

Last Sunday, David Eberly told us about being shot down over Iraq, paraded in chains through hostile streets, and imprisoned at dreadful Abu Ghraib in Baghdad. But thrusting himself into a sense of God's unconditionally abiding presence,

holding on to a Bible verse "*this poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him in all his troubles*" (Psalm 34:6 KJV) changed hopeless despair into deep trust and ever present hope for freedom.

These people came to understand what Jesus understood. They understood the way to change was refusing to act like a victim, not trusting conventional wisdom like might makes right, not forcing, coercing your will but how loving sacrifices earn authority so that when you speak, they will listen.

This is what they said about Jesus: He's not like the religious leaders. He's not like Herod. He's not like Pilate. When he speaks, he speaks with authority.

God, at the beginning of Holy Week, on our way to another Easter, give us ears to hear more than the same story we've tamed, hearing it again and again, one we'll likely put away by Easter Monday, without feeling sacrificial love. And even less resurrection.

Teach us what Jesus knew about power and authority. Guide our lives to learn from him.

■■■ Amen ■■■

The idea and structure for this sermon comes from my reading a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Anthony Campolo, sociologist, pastor, author and Professor Emeritus at Eastern University, St. David's Pa. The sermon called "*Earning the Right to be Heard*" appears on Lectionary Homiletics web site www.goodpreacher.com

The account of Mother Teresa's visit to Hamburg Pa. was taken from article "*Ed Mullin is No Mother Teresa*" published in *Pennsylvania Super Lawyers* June 2008.