

Homily – The Power Cycle

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One of the things that I love about living in Arroyo Grande is the lack of traffic. I have an eight-minute commute to church, and one of my possible routes lets me avoid any traffic lights. Before moving down here my daily commute was usually over an hour each direction with dozens of traffic lights. In those days I used to day dream about the power that my uncle had.

My uncle is now retired, but he used to be a traffic engineer and in charge of the roads in Montgomery County, Maryland, outside of Washington DC. Family legend says that with his responsibility for the roads my uncle actually had the traffic lights along his own commute route timed to speed up his commute to and from work. I think this is power I would like to have, power over the traffic lights!

Power is something that we all want. We all want to have more control over our lives and the ability to make choices that are favorable for us and for our loved ones. We want the ability to influence others.

Sometimes the desire for power becomes all-consuming. We have all heard stories of famous politicians or military leaders or business people or religious leaders who are consumed by the desire for power.

Sometimes the desire for power would sneak into my own life, especially when I continued to struggle up the corporate ladder in my job at Cisco Systems. As a result I would make myself miserable. My spiritual director used to counsel me to work on detachment when it comes to my own desires for power.

Perhaps some of you here today have these same struggles and have achieved success in overcoming your own unhealthy desire for power.

On the flip side, in this world of ours, there are many without much, if any, power. We often associate power with money or position but there are many other factors associated with power.

It will come as no surprise that some are valued higher than others by society. And, when you are valued more you have more power.

Here is an example. Society gives power to those of a certain age. The most powerful tend to be between 45 and 65. If you are younger than 45 years of age then your

power tends to be building and if you are older than 65 then society starts to diminish your power.

The same is true with gender. Our society tends to still give more power to men. So, if you are a man, by default, you are granted more power.

Here are some other criteria that are often used by society.

Race, ethnicity, physical ability, marital status, sexual orientation, education, economic status, geographic location, profession, language, and citizenship. I'm sure you can think of other criteria as well.

By default, each of us is granted more or less power based on characteristics that we sometimes have very little control over.

Now, Jesus had a lot to say about power. Over the last few months on our Sunday mornings we have been working our way through the Gospel according to Matthew, and we have been hearing how Jesus butted up against the power structures of two thousand years ago. In particular, he was confronting the powerful of the Temple in Jerusalem.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus uses a very thinly veiled analogy to tell the powerful of the Temple that they just were missing it. The Jewish people had been called into special relationship with God, but Jesus, was calling them into a deeper, closer relationship with God, a relationship that put God first and not ones own desires for power. However, the powerful of the Temple were refusing the invitation being made by Jesus to come to God. They were refusing to come to the wedding banquet.

And, Jesus points out in his story of the wedding feast that the powerless will be invited to share the relationship with God instead.

Sometimes we feel so familiar with stories and teachings of Jesus that we forget how radical they are. We often remember quotes like, "the first shall be last" or "blessed are the poor in spirit".

Unlike the messages on a greeting card, the Gospel message is a powerful call to change. This call started with the Greco-Roman society of two thousand years ago and is still a radical message for societies all around the globe, including our own.

At the same time, the Gospel tells the powerless in society to be empowered and speak up. The powerless are also called to change.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus interacts with the powerless. Bartemaeus, the woman with hemorrhages, the Paralytic by the pool, the Paralytic lowered through the roof by his friends, the woman accused of adultery, the widow whose son died, those criminals crucified with him, and even Lazarus who was raised from the dead.

In each instance Jesus treats these powerless people with dignity, a dignity that they didn't often receive from others. He says, I see you, I want to know you, and I value you.

The Gospels also tell the powerful in society to listen and give up some of their power. The powerful are also called to change.

Here are some examples of Jesus interacting with the powerful.

The rich young man, Nicodemus, the Centurion, Jarius, and Simon the Pharisee.

And again, in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is debating with the powerful of the Temple. He points out the flaws in their power and their refusal to come to the party with God. He points out that they don't really have the answers. Instead of taking and talking all the time, the powerful are called to listen a little more frequently. They are called to listen to others and to give up some of their power. They are called to be less self-centered. They are called to see and know those without power and empower the powerless to see themselves as valued and important.

The Gospel message is a radical message about power that lifts up the powerless and asks the powerful to change.

This is a message that was important two thousand years ago, and it is a message that is still important today.

Now, back when I was in seminary I was annoyed one day when our dining hall was taken over for an event, and I had to go eat dinner elsewhere. The event was for the endowment of a chair of women's studies at my seminary, and I felt put out of the dining hall. I grumbled in my own mind wondering why we still needed a chair for women's studies in the twenty-first century.

Later that night after getting off of my BART train in the East Bay, I was walking to my car. It was parked in a distant parking lot and as I walked down the quiet, dark path to my car, I noticed two men ahead. When they saw me approach they split and one stood on one side of the path and the other stood on the other side.

Seeing their movement, I was alarmed but decided to bluster on through anyway, and as I walked between them...

...nothing happened. With my heart pounding fast I walked to my car and got in.

As I was driving away and reflecting on what had just happened, I realized that being a healthy, white male might have saved me from some trouble, and that a woman of color might have been more vulnerable with those two men on the dark pathway.

After this BART experience, I quickly reconsidered my earlier grumblings about the chair of women's studies, and realized that we still have a lot of radical work to do to ensure the safety, health, opportunities and dignity of the powerless, and we must always consider our role as the powerful. And, here are some questions we must ask ourselves.

How do we use our power to do good and right wrongs?

How do we give up our desire for power?

How do we give up our power so that others may be lifted up as well?

These are some of the questions being asked by Jesus.

And, this is the message of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus. And here is what we can do.

As David Brooks says in his book "How To Know a Person" "seeing someone well is a powerfully creative act. No one can fully appreciate their own beauty and strengths unless those things are mirrored back to them in the mind of another." Brooks writes a of a pastor Jimmy Dorrell who runs a homeless ministry. "When Jimmy sees a person—any person—he is seeing a creature who was made in the image of God. As he looks into each face, he is looking, at least a bit, into the face of God. When Jimmy sees a person, any person, he is also seeing a creature endowed with an immortal soul—a soul of infinite value and dignity. When Jimmy greets a person, he is also trying to live up to one of the great callings of his faith: He is trying to see that person the way Jesus would see that person. As a result, Jimmy is going to greet people with respect and reverence... We're not equal in might, intelligence, or wealth, but we are all equal on the level of our souls. If you see the people you meet as precious souls, you'll probably wind up treating them well." And that act gives them power and dignity.

May those of us with power die to our own desires for power, and may those of us with little power be lifted up.

And, may we all have arms wide welcoming all others to God's party.