

## **Christ in Crisis: What do we do with power?**

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**August 2, 2020**

*Living God, may your word be proclaimed and may we claim it with joy for our lives today.  
Continue to speak to us through my words or in spite of them. Amen.*

Luke 22:24-30

### **The disciples debate greatness**

24 An argument broke out among the disciples over which one of them should be regarded as the greatest.

25 But Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles rule over their subjects, and those in authority over them are called 'friends of the people.' 26 But that's not the way it will be with you. Instead, the greatest among you must become like a person of lower status and the leader like a servant. 27 So which one is greater, the one who is seated at the table or the one who serves at the table? Isn't it the one who is seated at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

28 "You are the ones who have continued with me in my trials. 29 And I confer royal power on you just as my Father granted royal power to me. 30 Thus you will eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones overseeing the twelve tribes of Israel.

Recently, I had a birthday. It wasn't a particularly monumental one, but it did push me firmly out of the category of "young adult," even in the Church where we stretch that as long as we can, given the ever-shrinking numbers of young people in our pews and in our pulpits. As I have settled into this new era of "middle adulthood" I have begun to accept that I am who I am and that person I am is irrevocably shaped by the people with whom I grew up — namely, my parents. Increasingly, I find myself doing and saying things that strike an uncanny resemblance to my mother and father. Words come out of my mouth, and I find myself thinking, "Oh my. I really am my — more often than not — father's daughter."

You see, my father has a somewhat predictable way of speech. He has all of these little saying and quotes he throws out regularly to express what he's thinking. Many of them are baseball references, with a good dose of Yogi Berra quotes. Some are sayings from other famous figures in literature and life or unattributed but lasting proverbs. And many are phrases just uniquely him. When he retired, my family tried to compile his sayings into a booklet we called "Mark My Words" (his name is Mark). I pulled it out the other day and was horrified to realize how many of his idiosyncrasies are now also mine. Even the ones I don't say regularly pop into my head all the time. I realized, though, that we didn't quite document them all in this little book. Luckily, my wise sister left some blank pages in the back to add to this collection.

One of those missing sayings was one I would hear from my father frequently, when I would be engaged in an argument with him and my mother over some decision with which I disagreed. At some point in the discussion, he would inevitably look at me or my sister and say, “You seem to be mistaken. This is not a democracy. It’s a benevolent dictatorship.” Needless to say, that was a rather frustrating response to a teenager determined to persuade her parents to see the error of their ways. That said, in this middle adulthood I now find myself, even though I’m not a parent myself, I can look back and see some wisdom in that horribly undemocratic parenting style.

A benevolent dictatorship. A model of governance in which an authoritarian leader exercises absolute power but is perceived to do so with particular concern for the benefit of the people as a whole. Unchecked power tinged with compassion. Perhaps acceptable in parenting but less so in our modern political systems. In our scripture reading today, Jesus had some things to say about this kind of power.

The disciples are arguing about who among them is destined for greatness, and Jesus steps up to do what he tends to do, turning everything on its head. It’s worth noting that this isn’t the first time the subject has come up. We’re toward the end of Luke’s gospel at this point, but much earlier — back in the ninth chapter — they had this exact same argument about which disciple was the greatest<sup>1</sup>. That was when Jesus used a little kid as an object lesson and told them the answer was found in welcoming children. That was also when he confounded them by saying, “Whoever is least among you all is the greatest.”

But here we are, thirteen chapters later, and the disciples seem to have forgotten they already had this argument. Jesus hears them going at it (again) and interjects, this time saying, “The kings of the Gentiles rule over their subjects, and those in authority over them are called ‘friends of the people.’ But that’s not the way it will be with you.” The word “Gentiles” here can also be translated as simply “nations.” And this phrase “friends of the people” is a euphemism of sorts — other translations simply use the word “benefactor.” So, another way of hearing Jesus’ response is: “The kings of the nations lord it over everyone, even though they are so-called “benefactors. You should be better.” Jesus isn’t buying this benevolent dictatorship idea. He sees it for what it is, a misuse and abuse of power masquerading as goodwill for the masses. And he makes it clear that this kind of “greatness” has no place in God’s kin-dom.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, with admirable patience, goes on to repeat the lessons of earlier, telling these clueless disciples yet again, “The greatest among you must become like a person of lower status and the leader like a servant.” He again draws upon an object lesson to make his point, this time using himself and asking them who is greater: the ones sitting at the table in the traditional position of status and power (hint: that’s the disciples) or the one serving them. In case they don’t get it, Jesus spells it out for them, saying, “I am among you as one who serves.” Their argument now looks even pettier.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:46-48

<sup>2</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Kin-dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal,” in *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, ed. Benjamin Valentin (Orbis Books, 2010), 171.

Since the gospel writer included this debate about greatness not once but twice in his account of Jesus' life and ministry, it probably behooves us to pay attention to what Jesus is saying here. He's telling us something about this new world he's ushering in and about what leadership looks like there in contrast to the existing models we see. He's telling us something about power. Jesus knows that all we've seen are examples of power that rule over others, whose authority comes at the expense of others. He's saying to us, in this moment, "It doesn't have to be that way," pointing us to a new possibility where leadership is about serving instead of being served and power is no longer a zero-sum game.

This conversation happened two thousand years ago, but it could have just as easily happened today in 2020. We still live in a world that continually elevates the privileged into positions of authority where power is largely unchecked, while those without power are told they should simply trust the ruling classes to do what is best for them — to be those so-called "friends of the people." Even in America, where we regularly extol the virtues of democracy, only certain people are actually allowed to rule. It may not be written down in our constitution, but we know the unwritten rules: If you want to be elected, particularly for the highest offices in our land, you must be wealthy, connected, white, male, and profess to be both heterosexual and Christian. While we've seen a few exceptions over our two hundred and some odd years of existence, those rules have largely held true.<sup>3</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer, the civil rights activist, knew it, saying decades ago: "With the people, for the people, by the people — I crack up when I hear it. I say, with the handful, for the handful, by the handful, 'cause that's what really happens."<sup>4</sup> In 2020, we're still a far cry from a true democracy in America. This pattern of power isn't just limited to our government. We know it's also true in our companies, our institutions and organizations, and yes, even our churches. Power is held by a select few, and that power is held on to by any means necessary.

Two thousand years ago, Christ was trying to show us a different way. He turned our models upside down, literally reversing our expectations that those on top stay on top by telling us that in this new world the lowest of the low are our leaders and that the way to be great is to serve. We shouldn't be surprised. This is the same Christ who, in the womb, was hearing his mother say radical things about bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly.<sup>5</sup> This is the same Christ who told those with privilege to wait so that he could first care for the most marginalized and forgotten.<sup>6</sup> This is the same Christ who got on his knees to wash the dirty, stinky feet of his followers.<sup>7</sup> This is the same Christ who gave up all of his power even in the face of torture and death.<sup>8</sup> He showed us it doesn't have to be this way, but we really haven't listened, have we?

Earlier I told you about this collection of my dad's frequent sayings. One of them in here is, "People get the government they deserve." While that's a little harsh, I think there's some truth to it. Again and again, we elect leaders who mirror our own distorted values. We vote for the wealthy as they promise to increase, or at least preserve, our own wealth, so we shouldn't be

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<sup>3</sup> <https://wholeads.us/electedofficials/>

<sup>4</sup> Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 165.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:46-55

<sup>6</sup> Luke 8:40-56

<sup>7</sup> John 13:1-17

<sup>8</sup> John 19:28-34

surprised when the rich get richer while the poor are sent further down into the abyss of poverty. We reward the evisceration of political opponents in attack ads, debates, and on Twitter, so we shouldn't be surprised to find civility a rare commodity in our public discourse and our own society further polarized. We tacitly approve of gerrymandering and voter suppression while hoping it increases the odds that our candidate will get elected, so we shouldn't be surprised when we find that it's nearly impossible to change the political trajectory of our cities, states, and even nation. Perhaps indeed we have the government we deserve.

Last week, Pastor Steve mentioned the "Reclaiming Jesus" declaration, written by an ecumenical group of faith leaders a few years ago. In it, they wrote, "We believe that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination.... We believe our elected officials are called to public service, not public tyranny, so we must protect the limits, checks, and balances of democracy and encourage humility and civility on the part of elected officials. We support democracy, not because we believe in human perfection, but because we do not. The authority of government is instituted by God to order an unredeemed society for the sake of justice and peace, but ultimate authority belongs only to God.... We believe authoritarian political leadership is a theological danger that threatens democracy and the common good — and we will resist it."<sup>9</sup>

We've shown we're far from this ideal of human perfection, so we are indeed called to be defenders of democracy, to recommit to Christ's way of leadership and power. As with everything in this series that we're calling "Christ in Crisis," this issue is not merely a political issue. It's a theological concern, at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. Let me be clear: There are political implications. As are there implications for our professional lives, our personal lives, and our shared life in the Church. We cannot follow Jesus without taking seriously this question of power.

Most of you know that my appointment before this one was down in Tennessee. While I was serving a local church, I was also employed by the Tennessee Conference of the United Methodist Church to facilitate anti-racism and anti-sexism trainings for the clergy and other leaders in the conference. We would spend all day having honest conversation about these challenging, uncomfortable issues, and, to their credit, most of the participants actively engaged throughout. Consistently, though, there was one point in the day that we'd get to when the conversation would stop. It was after we watched a video of Dr. Christena Cleveland, a brilliant theologian and academic. In this video, she had a lot to say about privilege and power, and I want you to hear just a bit of what she says. Here she's just finished talking about the example of Jesus and his response to power. *[play video clip]*<sup>10</sup>

We all have some sort of power we need to give up, if we're going to seriously follow Christ. Again, this is where the conversation would always stall out. As I pondered that pattern over all those trainings, I came to the conclusion that we couldn't respond to that challenge because we really don't have any models of what that looks like. We only know power as this thing that's glorified and hoarded, instead of this thing that is shared, dispersed, and given away.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.reclaimingjesus.org/sites/default/files/downloads/reclaiming\\_jesus.pdf](http://www.reclaimingjesus.org/sites/default/files/downloads/reclaiming_jesus.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> excerpt from <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/privilege-and-power>

So what do we do with power? We give it away, and we watch it change the world. In practical terms, that means doing the work of self-examination to recognize what power we wield and in turn start letting go of it. It means pausing the next time we're asked to lead or speak to question, "Who isn't being asked?" and giving up our seat at the table so someone else can be heard. It means educating ourselves on our political systems and processes so that we better understand whose voices — whose votes — actually count in our flawed democracy and then exercising the voice we do have to advocate for changes in how we do our elections, how we fund campaigns, how we restore voting rights to all people. It means expecting more of our elected officials, telling them with our voice and vote that we expect our leaders to exemplify the ethics of public service and model servant leadership — what I would argue stands in stark contrast to the leadership we see today. It means believing that it doesn't have to be this way and actively choosing a different path, one that requires us to abdicate our own power.

Jesus, in his never-ending patience, hears our squabbles about greatness and shows us, again, the better way. What do we do with power? Just give it away. I'm not saying it's easy. But it's worth it, for there we'll find the kin-dom of God.

This is the Good News. Thanks be to God!