

Sermon May 24, 2020

Grace mercy and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is our hope and prayer here at Redeemer that you are all having a blessed Memorial Day weekend. We have so much on our minds today as we gather in worship. Of course, we are thinking about Memorial Day and the great sacrifice that many have made for the sake of our country. And that image of personal sacrifice resonates in such a new way in our current crisis, because we also know of great personal sacrifice from those who have struggled to care properly for the sick and the dying. Struggle for the sake of survival, or just sanity, stirs our hearts as it mixes with the imagery of struggle for political freedom and the cause of liberty in our nation's history.

Also in our minds this weekend are the questions that come from the continued relaxation of Covid19 Pandemic restrictions. In the past week or two, we have witnessed more people out and about, more businesses opening, and people traveling to other areas of the region or state. Other states are on different timetables. How should we approach all this?

Add to that the fact that this is the season for graduations, confirmations, and other milestone experiences for our young people. How do we make special experiences for them that somehow celebrate their accomplishments and mark the transitions from one stage to another, when we aren't allowed to gather to celebrate?

And add to that the sad state of the culture wars in our country, such that every opinion or view about the virus ends up becoming fodder for our ongoing political fights.

Finally, we even have our president's admonition to state governors on Friday to allow all churches to meet in person as soon as possible. His argument that churches are "essential" is clearly a political statement, coming as it does so late in the stages of overall response to the pandemic. We know why churches are closed right now. Our Bishop, the Rev. Tracie Bartholomew, wrote a letter on Friday clarifying the New Jersey Synod's stance on this issue. She writes:

“The president’s declaration about opening this weekend should not lead you to rush to have in person indoor worship services. I am eager to gather again in person but not at the expense of the most vulnerable among us. Many of our members and most active churchgoers are older which puts them in a high-risk category. Some of our rostered leaders have underlying health conditions, which also puts them in a high-risk category. A number of our buildings do not allow for the physical distancing required (6 feet between non-family groups) to have more than a handful of people present. In NJ, the stay-at-home orders remain in place.”

The fact is that NJ still has high numbers of infection and death. As of Thursday, May 21, 2020, there were 1394 new cases of the Covid19, and 146 deaths. Assuming that the current trend stays consistent, this means that tomorrow, about 1000 more people will become infected by the virus, and will test positive in another week or so. This will happen because people who have the virus today and don’t know they have it will interact with those who don’t yet have it. Of that group who will get the virus tomorrow, about 80 to 90 of them will die in a couple of weeks. Maybe make the number higher, since tomorrow’s a holiday. Then there’s Tuesday’s new infections, and Wednesday’s, and so on. Even while the overall trend is going down, this is scary, and tragic, and avoidable if we remain diligent and disciplined about precautions.

We at Redeemer are eager to meet again, but we are going to be cautious. We are waiting for a clear signal of permission from Governor Murphy and our local borough officials. On top of that, we are preparing for the eventual return to in-person worship gatherings, but not for a couple of weeks at least. We do not know exactly when that will be permissible, and even then, we are not quite sure of how we will have to manage worshippers as we gather. We are currently working on those issues and will give clear guidelines when we finally prepare to invite people back to church to worship.

What is so depressing on this Memorial Day weekend, is that in the face of such a danger, we still have so little unity within the American society. As Christians, we are forced to pray and wait, both of which seem so futile sometimes. But in the midst of this disunity, and contention and conflict, Jesus’ promises ring in our ears today. Jesus promises that there is a unity of purpose coming, established by God through the power of Christ’s death and resurrection. This power of God’s is not to be confused with our human obsession with power, nor is it to be confused

with the Glory of God that is said to accompany God's revelations in history. In our situation of social and political chaos, Christians are reminded today to hold fast to the promises in Christ Jesus, for he is our power and the glory. Christ is essential. Christ brings in the kingdom. We do not.

As we speak of God's power and glory, we are preparing for the celebration of Pentecost next Sunday. That festival day celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Church shortly after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. As I mentioned in my Ascension Day message this past week, we are in the midst of what could be called our Week of Power. Ascension Day celebrates the end of the 40-day period of the risen Jesus with his disciples, and the beginning of the last week before the giving of the Holy Spirit. We speak of power during this week in order to refer to the powerful vision of the ascension of Jesus' body into heaven, which also suggests the power in his eventual return, as well as the power of the Holy Spirit that created the church.

Please, brothers and sisters, we need to recognize in all of the details of this story, that the disciples and followers of Jesus never exhibit their own human power or glory, but only that power which is unique to the presence of Christ with them through the Holy Spirit.

The disciples are not in any position of power, nor are they in any way being given power over other people or even other circumstances. The power bestowed on them is that of faith. The disciples must simply follow Jesus, look heavenward as he goes up to heaven in front of them, and then wait for this Spirit, this advocate that Jesus has promised.

In fact, throughout this whole story of Jesus' death and resurrection, whatever power is revealed belongs to God. The workings of human power, and our obsession with it, lead to Jesus' rejection and arrest, and human power plays out in the politics of his trial and execution. But as Jesus says in John's Gospel, it is by God's power that this death of Jesus takes place at all. It is by God's power that Jesus is risen from the dead, and God's power by which the disciples witness, and to which they then testify in their subsequent ministries. And it becomes our experience of God's power that, like the early disciples, we too find ourselves waiting on divine power, and trusting God to do amazing work. When we experience the work of God in our lives through Jesus Christ, we too become witnesses to the Gospel.

Related to the lesson in this text about God's power, is a lesson for us about Glory. The prayer Jesus prays in this text for today is directed toward God and focuses on the intimate connection between the honor and glory Jesus is due and the honor and glory of God who commissions Jesus' work. But the trick to interpreting this correctly is to see that Jesus' work is really his crucifixion and then resurrection. According to Jesus' prayer, Jesus' glory is rooted in the authority God the Father has given to him, according to the work Jesus has done for God the Father on the cross. Contrary to our human standards of glory, which we associate with power and victory, Jesus' glory is in his crucifixion. God it seems, intends that this will undermine our understanding and assumptions about power.

Jesus has already alluded to this earlier in John 12:23-28. At a moment in the story when he is finished with the giving of the signs of his mission and power, such as turning water into wine, or raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, Jesus turns to speak of the hour that approaches, in which we will see the climax of his mission. He says to the disciples,

²³ ... "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The metaphor of a seed germinating seems to soften the violence of the actual death by execution that Jesus will undergo.

Jesus doesn't see this as an easy task, and is clear that this is a traumatic and devastating event, when he prays:

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!"

It is one of the unique traits of the Gospel of John that Jesus' crucifixion is in a paradoxical way the highest moment of his revelation of power and authority. Biblical scholars have noted that in the Gospel of John, Jesus' moment of glory is not necessarily the resurrection, but first in the crucifixion. What looks most like failure is in fact the victory of God over what ails us. A great example of this human focus on power and glory is the question about restoring the Kingdom to Israel in our first lesson today that the disciples ask Jesus moments before his ascension. They ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" This question is based on the expectation held by many Jews in this

period that the advent of the messiah of Israel would bring in the restoration of the kingdom to its former glory, as in the time of David.

What better indication of the glory of God on earth than a military type overturning of the current status quo? What better way to reveal the power of God than to restore the political glory of Israel in the presence of all her enemies? In the process of asking it, we see the articulation of human understandings of power and glory in this seemingly rational question. Yet, it is the purpose of God in Jesus' ministry to undermine our expectations and restore the fortunes of Israel in a paradoxical way, especially a way that opens up the field of victory over death to the world as a whole. All of this happens contrary to our very human expectations. St. Paul said it first and best in his first letter to the Corinthians (1:25): "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

So in answer to their question, a clarification is made: 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus takes all the guess work out of human expectations, assumptions and prejudices, and puts the onus on people's faith in God's power working according to God's own timetable. In other words, we are given faith to trust God, not power to establish God's kingdom. This is a power that actually has nothing to do with the political power manifest and fought over among the nations, nor is it fought over in the struggle for hegemony among social groups in human history. This promise of power, again, rooted in the authority of Jesus which is given by God the Father, is the power to remain faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ over time through the helpful presence of the Holy Spirit. This power is the power to live by faith alone. It is all about faith, understood as the most righteous response of human beings to the righteousness of God. This faith in God re-establishes the proper relationship between humans who are creatures dependent on God, and God as the initiator of all things, the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all things, and the one to whom all things are returning. This power is the power to actually fulfill the first commandment, as God declares, you shall have no other Gods before me.

The Holy Spirit holds this correct assessment of things before the mind of faith, and bids us accept our proper role in the hierarchy of Creator and creature. The Spirit comes at the beckoning of Jesus, and this advocate takes up residence in the world through the church as protector of faith and the creative power of God's purposes toward the restoration of abundant life and hope in the world. The Spirit works to build up, restore the desolate spirit of those who have lost hope, correct and chasten the misguided spirit of the proud, and proclaim mercy and forgiveness to those whose spirit is burdened by guilt and shame. The Spirit does not help us wield power over other entities, groups or individuals; rather its power sustains our faith and helps us live in sacrificial self-giving for the well-being of others. It is in this way that we live according to the mission and purpose of the Gospel in the world.

In these days of social upheaval, when people associate themselves with different and opposing camps, when not even a global pandemic can unify us in spirit and purpose, we find ourselves in the very mired muck of political disintegration. We find ourselves stuck in opposing camps, whose different beliefs about our common experience lead to conflict and political turmoil. We find that because of our very real will to power, we are left disagree over how bad the virus is, how grave its effects on people, how high the actual count of victims, and how best to live right now without getting sick ourselves.

We even recognize that as human beings, each with our own preferred take on the world, and each armed with our own preferred media accounts and information chains, are as stuck in our outlooks, and resentful of those who oppose us, as everyone else. Who will reconcile these opposing forces, these visions that think they only survive if they completely cancel out their opposing side? Who will ever bring us together as one human family? Who will ever set us right, and establish without question the true authority of God and the power and authority of the Son? Who will reconcile us to ourselves and each other?

Praise be to God, that among the many million calamities of human frailty, selfish and self-serving violence, and destructive hubris, our savior comes, glorified by his willingness to follow God's mission through complete rejection and imperial execution, and then rise again. Jesus Christ quietly asserts God's righteous judgment on all our human will to power with a holy act of divine self-giving, one

which undoes the power of death by rising again from the tomb. God's glory doesn't come in the public vanquishing of our perceived enemies, but in the defeat of our common enemy, death. In the terror of death, whether consciously or unconsciously, we all sin against each other because we fear for our survival. In the face of these things, we can only point to Christ and his victory. In the meantime, as Peter says in our second lesson, this morning;

"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. 8 Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. 10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

May this power of the Gospel, and the peace which it brings, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.