

*God of deliverance and freedom, deepen our faith so that we have the courage to fearlessly examine ourselves, and from that self-examination, be moved to towards making your kin-dom a reality. Amen.*

March 10, 2019 – Luke 4:1-13

### **“Imagine a World without Power Struggles”**

Last week I had a conversation with a young man who asked to talk to me about key issues within the LGBT community from a scriptural perspective. At the beginning of the conversation, he let me know his was a conservative and evangelical background, and he held a different view than I about what the Bible does and does not say about homosexuality. So I knew from the outset it would be a challenging conversation.

At one point in the discussion, we talked about last year’s Supreme Court Masterpiece Cakeshop ruling about a baker who refused to make a same-sex wedding cake. I shared with the young man that I thought businesses should be required to serve everyone without discrimination, but he felt differently. He asked if I were a baker, how I would feel if a customer expected me to bake a cake with a swastika on it or a message of hate. And I was stumped because, by my argument, I should be required to bake the cake.

I went home, gave it some thought, and realized there was only one answer, which I emailed to the young man. If I take Jesus seriously – the Jesus who said to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us – if I took Jesus seriously, then I would be compelled to bake a cake with the most beautiful swastika one had ever seen emblazoned across the top. And I would most likely do it while crying throughout the entire cake-baking and decorating process.

The young man wasn’t a bad person. Far from it, he is a good person. But because of my encounter with him, I was challenged to examine my values.

That’s what’s happening in this morning’s text. Jesus encounters the devil in the wilderness. And I don’t see the devil as some evil being determined to trip him up. Instead Richard Swanson compares the devil to a Cosmic Building Inspector come to Jesus in the wilderness to check out the stuff Jesus is made of, sort of the way a building inspector examines the structure of a building.

So instead of thinking of this morning’s text as a series of temptations or tests, one might look at it as an examination. The young man I just spoke about challenged me, and in so doing, helped me to examine my values. And in our text, the devil challenges Jesus, and in so doing, helps Jesus to examine his values. And as I looked closely at the three elements of the examination, I came to the conclusion that each of them seem to revolve around power.

First, Jesus is challenged to turn stones into bread. It would have been very tempting for Jesus to do that. After all, he had gone a very long time without food and was famished. But if you think about it, Jesus never seemed to use his power for his own gain. His healings and his miraculous feedings always benefited others. And so despite his own hunger, he passed on using his power to benefit himself. That would have been a misuse of his power.

Next, Jesus is enticed into a lust for power. The devil takes him to a place where Jesus could see every nation of the world. And Jesus was told, “You can have all this if you shift your allegiance from God to me.” Imagine what that would have meant. If Jesus ruled over all nations, there wouldn’t have been a need for self-sacrifice, no suffering, no excruciatingly painful death. But instead, of taking the devil up on the offer, Jesus passed. As tempting as it must have been, Jesus seemed to realize that his future was one of service to others, not power over other people.

Finally, Jesus is invited to participate in a PR stunt that would surely wow the crowds. He is invited to throw himself off the top of the temple in Jerusalem some hundreds of feet high. The plan was that, before hitting ground, he would be rescued by the angels of heaven. In this instance, Jesus was being tempted to take his power for granted. Sure in the knowledge that he was wrapped up in the power

of divine privilege, he could go places and do things that other people could not. And he was being tempted to take advantage of that privilege. And once again, Jesus declined the offer.

And so, you see, I feel like Jesus' examination was one that revolved around the misuse and abuse of power – something that has plagued humanity throughout history. And today, wave after wave of scandals has made it painfully clear: the abuse of power is an epidemic of mass proportions.

We don't have to go far for examples. Ex-Baylor student, Jacob Walter Anderson was indicted on four counts of sexual assault in 2016 based on allegations that he drugged and raped a 19-year-old sophomore at a fraternity party. But prosecutors offered him the chance to plea to a lesser charge, which means he won't spend a day in jail, and his record will be expunged in three years if he pays a \$400 fine and submits to psychological, alcohol, and drug treatment.

Or consider the case of Estela -Fajardo: a woman who made the mistake of unknowingly buying stolen goods from some guys, thinking that she was helping them out of a bind. After three years in prison, she finally got her day in court. And because she went public on the sexual and physical abuse she has received in that prison, prosecution aggressively went after her, trying to paint her as a crime boss, and finding her guilty.

Everywhere you look, you find examples of power struggles. The struggle of marginalized people to gain power, and the struggle of those in power to maintain their power. You don't have to look far to find instances of the misuse of power, lust for power, and power taken for granted by the privileged.

But is that the way it has to be? Is there nothing we can do? Jesus thought there was. He described something that goes by many names: the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, the kin-dom of God, the Dominion of God, and the Beloved Community, to name just a few.

The reality of God's kin-dom calls to mind a children's book called "Cory & the Seventh Story," in which a mysterious visitor named Swifthorse comes to the Old Village and recites this poem at a special dinner: "There is no big or small, no short or tall, / No best or worst, no blessed or cursed, / No dirty or clean, no cause to be mean, / No rich or poor, no reason for war, / We have more than enough in the story of love. / Each is for all of us, and all are for each of us. / This is the wisdom this new story teaches us." This is the best description I know of, if we imagine a world without power struggles.

You see, we have the opportunity to rewrite the story of our current reality of war, and poverty, and discrimination, and violence of all kinds. And the kin-dom of heaven is that new story. But for it to become a reality, we must be willing to give advocate and work towards a world in which there are no more power struggles, a world in which everyone has enough. Sometimes that means being a voice for the voiceless. Sometimes that means seeing a domination system for what it is and refusing to give our consent to it. Sometimes that means participating in protests on behalf of the marginalized. Sometimes it means using my own power to advocate for others. And sometimes it even means giving up some of my power.

It's no easy task, this new story that Jesus invites us to write: this story in which there are no more power struggles. But that's our calling: a calling to not only imagine a world without power struggles, but a calling to do the work to make that world a reality.

May God give us the strength, the courage, and the willingness to do just that. May we imagine a world without power struggles and then work toward making that imagined dream into a reality. Amen.