

## Privilege and Power

Matthew 4:1-11

3/1/2020

First Sunday of Lent

Jill Duffield tells us we are in danger on this First Sunday of Lent. “Every first Sunday of Lent I get reminded of the perils of our baptismal calling. The Spirit descends, God speaks and then almost immediately, before we've even dried off, the devil makes a counteroffer: Wouldn't you prefer a shortcut to resources and power? Don't you want to be affirmed by the masses, afforded status and special treatment? Doesn't a guarantee of no pain and suffering sound good to you? Beloved child of God is good, but invincibility and limitless wealth, isn't that much better?”<sup>1</sup>

We love our privilege and power. We teach our children about success, telling them to work hard so they can gain these very things. We idolize those who have achieved it. The self-help sections of our bookstores – once physical, now largely online – are populated by many tomes written by “successful” people telling us how we can be like them if we will just follow their advice.

The gospels present us with a dangerous challenge. We claim to be people of the font and the cross, but so often we pursue power and privilege because of the comfort and security these provide us. And not just us as individuals. Douglas John Hall points out the church gives into these temptations very quickly also, for example, the close alignment with political powers practiced by Christians from Constantine well into modern times,<sup>2</sup> or on a more local level, the way churches cut mission spending as a way to balance our budgets.

We love reading the gospel stories of healing and feeding and deliverance from evil, but it is striking that both at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and in the penultimate chapter of his ministry, there are no miracles, nor power, nor control. In the wilderness, we see a starving man who refuses to display any miraculous power. On Calvary, we see a beaten, thirsty man dying, a future that awaits all of us, the final loss of power.

Will Jesus call us as individuals and as a church to release our hold on power and privilege? Have we already faced these temptations and failed? Are we already too far gone, hopelessly entangled in the tempter's snare?

Let's take those questions in reverse order. No, we are not too far gone. The tempter does not have us trapped, ready for the kill. That is the amazing message of the gospel and the reason we

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<sup>1</sup> Duffield, Jill. “Looking into the Lectionary”, <https://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/looking-into-the-lectionary/>, March 1, 2020, “1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent.”

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Douglas John, Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide, First Sunday in Lent, Matthew 4:1-11.

enter on our Lenten journey with hope. We are following a savior who did indeed refuse to exercise power and privilege except for those moments when the Spirit guided him to do so. The savior, who began his ministry and ended his life with abdication of privilege and power, did so to give us new life. His refusal to be trapped gives us freedom. His speaking the truth to the tempter exposed the falseness of those temptations and shows us how to live. Jesus' baptism and Jesus' moments of abdication of power are grace filled events that destroy the hold of sin and tear open the nets that would trap us.

Yes, we have faced those temptations and failed. Often miserably. Denying it is foolish and needless and is even giving into those temptations again. To deny our failure is to step off the temple and expect everyone to see us fly. But there is no floating down through the air. There's not even a coyote cartoon moment where we stand frozen in the air before we look down and realize we have stepped onto nothing. No, when we falsely claim we are not people who grasp privilege and power, we step into thin air and accelerate at  $9.8 \text{ m/s}^2$  or for the non-metric fans,  $32 \text{ ft/s}^2$  towards destruction.

I heard a wonderful expression this week. "Tell the truth and shame the devil." This saying has roots as far back as 1555, according to the website "The Phrase Finder." Shakespeare puts these words in the mouth of Sir Henry Percy, aka Hotspur,

And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil  
By telling truth: tell truth and shame the devil.  
If thou have power to raise him, bring him hither,  
And I'll be sworn I have power to shame him hence.  
O, while you live, tell truth and shame the devil!<sup>3</sup>

The person who I heard use this expression this week was an amazing woman named Courtney Brown, who is the Family Partnership Director for East Central Ohio Habitat for Humanity. She leads the efforts to prepare family partners in Canton and the surrounding counties for home ownership. They have 2% default rate on their mortgages while being in the top 40 Habitats for house building so clearly, they are doing something right. One of the focal points of this education is teaching people to be honest with themselves so they can avoid mistakes they may have made in the past and make wiser choices in the future.

That's a lesson we could all use. We need to be very honest with ourselves. We do have extensive privileges. We do try to protect those privileges even if it means abusing our power. Saying, "Well others have far more privilege and power than I do," is just another cover. When we deny the blessings that fill our lives, we are denying our place of privilege and the power that comes with it.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/409500.html>

What privileges do we have? We have bread aplenty, never having to face the possibility of wondering what stones might taste like. We live in a fairly safe society. The reason the reports of workplace and school place shootings shock us is because these are still out of the ordinary. While acknowledging that some of us suffer from many ailments, we do have abundance of blessings of health. The reason a pandemic threat strikes fear in our hearts is because we have not seen anything like this in our country in a century. The millions lost in the stock market scare us because many of us had something to lose. Privilege tempts us to abuse power, to protect what we have, sharing meagerly with others because there might not be enough to go around. "Let others work out if stones can become bread," we think to ourselves.

God is calling us to release our privilege and power by sharing what we have with others. The worldwide corona virus scare, I pray, turns out to be a needless panic but it may turn out to be a very real pandemic. We may find ourselves dealing with the banning of public events including worship. We may find store shelves empty. We may find those with serious chronic health challenges wondering if they will be able to get life-saving medications. We may find many people out of work for a time because of the shuttering of restaurants, closing of schools and the shutdown of businesses.

If this possible wilderness challenge becomes real, God will call us to find ways to share, to give to others sacrificially and dangerously, to surrender our privilege and power. Some of it will be comfort offered through phone calls. Some if it may be organizing in creative ways to insure those who don't have enough get enough. The privileges we enjoy may well become the source of life saving force for others.

I will ask our elders at our March meeting to consider what our church should be doing so we are prepared. Some of this will focus on practical questions about what it means to the church as an organization, but we also need to consider what it means to be witnesses to our community. What resources can we share not just with our close neighbors but with those around the world who have far less than we do? What ways can we support local groups and health care workers who will work to relieve suffering and bring healing? How can we show love to our neighbors? Deacons, I will ask for you to have this discussion as well in April.

We as Christians living in the world can do much to prepare on our own. I know families are already discussing what this means for themselves. Plenty of folks are stocking up on supplies. We need to also consider our neighbors, particularly those who are infirmed or who have no family close by. It will truly become a chance to practice the commandment to love neighbor as self. We can ensure neighbors are safe, have enough to eat and can get where they need to go if there are medical problems. And yes, that might mean we will place ourselves a little closer than we might find comfortable to folks who may be suffering. And, if our prayers are answered, and this does not turn out to be a pandemic, then we will have strengthened the bonds in our community.

I mentioned earlier how we teach our children to pursue the very things that we find ourselves asked to surrender. Well, that's part of the reason we do teach our children to be wise stewards, to become educated, to learn skills which can result in privilege and power. We do this so that when the moment comes when there are folks in need, we can surrender our privilege and power and show people we truly are the followers of the one who did the same.

The church has approached this table throughout history in all sorts of circumstance of far greater challenge than we face today. God meets us here just as God met the church throughout the centuries. Here we find our privilege challenged and we are granted God's grace. Here we find our abuse of power exposed and forgiveness for how we have harmed others. Here we find freedom from the tempters snare and God grants us the gift of love that we can share with others. Here we are given bread for the journey that will sustain us to Jerusalem, to Calvary and then beyond to the empty tomb. Here we meet the one who gave up privilege and power so that we could find salvation. Here we meet Jesus who invites us to give up privilege and power and become a blessing for others. Amen.