

“Power in an Age of Exile”
Sermon Series on *Strangers in a Strange Land*
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(John 19:1-16)

Introduction.

During the season of Lent, we have been looking at the fact that the church in North America is in a season of exile. The sands have shifted and the times have changed, and the church no longer enjoys the prominent position of influence it once did in this country. We’ve also looked at the history of the nation of Israel, and we’ve studied the way in which they also experienced a season of exile when they were conquered by the Babylonians and taken as captives to a foreign land.

These last few weeks we’ve examined how the Jews coped with the profound changes that occurred in their lives when they became exiles, and we’ve seen that, surprisingly, during that time, while it was very challenging in many ways, many of the Jewish people actually flourished in their relationship with God. The hardship they experienced had a way of refining their faith, and it stripped away what was superfluous. And just like the Jews in Babylon 2,500 years ago, Christians today are discovering that we too can flourish in our season of exile, and it can be a time when our faith is refined and deepened as well.

This morning we’re going to take a look at the whole issue of *power* in exile. When you’re no longer in the seat of influence and you lose the power you once enjoyed, how do you cope with this loss, and how do you still influence the world around you? And what does power even look like in exile? What I hope you’ll discover is that while the church in exile no longer has the cultural power it once did, nevertheless the power of God is still at work in our lives and in the world. The balance of power may have shifted all around us, and the terms of engagement may require something very different in this new day. But God is still at work, and He can still use us in powerful ways.

On this Palm Sunday I want us to examine the encounter Jesus had with Pilate the governor the last day of Jesus’ life, because I believe it reveals a contrast in the way the world views and uses power and how God approaches it in a very different way. The contrast is profound, and I think it is instructive for every believer today.

I. Coercive Power and the Way of the World.

The passage we've read this morning is the most dramatic account of the trial of Jesus in the NT, and the drama in the passage lies in the clash and interplay of personalities in their use and abuse of power. The **first** to abuse their power that day were **the Jewish leaders**. Notice that they didn't hesitate to twist their charge against Jesus, because in their own private examination of the Lord, the charge they leveled against Christ was one of blasphemy. They said that Jesus claimed to be God (Mt. 26:65). However, they knew that Pilate wouldn't proceed on a charge like that, so the Jewish leaders produced a charge of rebellion and political insurrection instead. They accused Jesus of claiming to be a king.

The irony in all this came when they said, "We have no king but Caesar." When the Romans first came to Palestine, they took a census in order to arrange for the taxation of the people. But there was a bloody rebellion over this, because the Jews insisted that God alone was their king, and to Him alone would they pay tribute. However, on this day the Jews were happy to hail Caesar as their king.

The **second** to abuse his power was **Pilate**. The Roman governor was aware that the charges against Jesus were a string of lies, and the text tells us he didn't want to condemn Jesus to death. But Pilate succumbed to the blackmail of the Jewish leaders, and he chose self-interest over doing the right thing. Pilate could ill afford another bad report to Rome because of trouble in the past, so when the Jewish leaders said, "If you let this man go free, you are no friend of Caesar," they were suggesting they would report the governor to his superiors. It was then that Pilate succumbed to their pressure, and he condemned Jesus to die.

The **final group** to abuse power were **the soldiers**. When Jesus was given to them for flogging, they decided to amuse themselves by making sport of Him. They put a purple robe on Jesus, a cloak worn by military officers and people in high position. A crown of thorns was woven together and crammed on the top of His head. They struck Jesus on the face and mocked Him by saying, "Hail, O King of the Jews!"

In each of these instances, people who were in positions of authority abused their power. Rather than seeking to use their influence to do the right thing, they succumbed to their base instincts and their own self-interest. And they took advantage of someone who was weaker than they were in society. It grieves the heart of God whenever this happens.

Now, it's easy for us who are removed from the situation to sit in judgment of those who abused power that day, but each of us needs to be careful that we in our own way don't abuse power whenever it's entrusted to us. Whether we're a parent, a supervisor, a teacher, a boss, or even a big brother or sister, each of us has opportunities to abuse power. And we need to be careful to exercise our power in a manner that is circumspect, even when we live as exiles.

Richard Foster writes in his book, *Money, Sex and Power*, "Today, by and large, political leaders give more energy to jockeying for position than to serving the public good. Business executives care more for staying on top of the heap than producing a useful product. University professors seek sophistication more than truth. And religious leaders care more for their personal image than for the gospel. ...Power can destroy or create. The power that destroys demands ascendancy; it seeks control. It destroys relationships, trust, dialogue, and integrity. And this is true whether we look through the macrocosm of human history or the microcosm of our own personal histories."¹

The world's approach to power is ultimately coercive. It seeks to bully and control. It manipulates and imposes. But the power of God is very different. It isn't coercive. Instead it's redemptive. And in many ways it's actually subversive to the power structures of the world. We see this in the life of Jesus.

II. The Subversive Power of the Son of God.

In his conversation with Jesus, Pilate warned Christ that he had the power to release Jesus or to crucify Him. However, Christ told the governor that he had no power at all, except what had been given to him by God. Jesus pointed out that Pilate was mistaken about his power, and there is an illusion of power that tends to overcome most people in positions of authority.

I remember when I lived in Washington, D.C., there was a term I learned called "Potomac Fever." It referred to the way in which everyone in Washington, which was bordered by the Potomac River, developed an inflated sense of self-importance. This extended beyond the Senators and Congressmen down to Legislative Aids, Capitol Hill pages, and Department of Education clerks. Local news was national news, and you felt like you had your finger on the pulse of the world.

But with that heady experience comes the illusion of power. No matter who we are and no matter what we do, the human power we wield is a limited power. And one day each of us will have to give an account to God for the way in which we have exercised our influence. There was once a well-known and influential lobbyist in Washington, D.C. who was on his deathbed, and he was asked by a friend what it was like to have all that power in the nation's capital. His response was, "Power? I'm about to meet real power!"²

Pilate had the illusion that he had power over Jesus, but our Lord gave the governor a quick lesson on metaphysical truth. Our God is a sovereign God, and He is the one who holds all the trump cards in the deck. The psalmist wrote, "*He has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all*" (Ps. 103:19). And the apostle Paul said, "*God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will*" (Eph. 1:11). God's sovereignty is displayed in human

history, and ultimately He rules the destiny of people and nations. Pilate was greatly mistaken, and so is every person who succumbs to the illusion of power.

Jesus' perspective on power was altogether different, and Christ presented an alternative way of looking at it. No one ever had at their disposal greater powers than Jesus did. Think of His ability to sway the multitudes through His Sermon on the Mount, or to calm a raging storm simply by saying a word. Think of His ability to cast out demons, or open blind eyes, or, for that matter, curse a fig tree and have it wither. Earlier in his gospel John wrote, "*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God*" (13:3). Jesus held these powers not with a clinched fist for His own benefit. Rather, He held these powers with an open hand, as something received in order to be given away and stewarded in a redemptive manner that honored His heavenly Father.

The most shocking statement in Jesus' conversation with Pilate was when Christ said, "*My kingdom is not of this world.*" It completely befuddled the governor. The Romans clearly understood that their kingdom was of this world, but so did the Jews. They were looking for the Messiah to use His power to set them free. But Jesus came as a suffering servant at His first advent, not as a conquering king. And His mission was to give His life for sinful humanity.

Instead of asserting His rights, Jesus laid them aside. As the apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2, Jesus didn't regard His power as God's equal as something to be grasped or exploited, but He emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant. And in the end Jesus used His power to give His life as a sacrifice for others, and He died on the cross for you and me.

But the deep magic of the universe, as C.S. Lewis once called it, was that it was through Jesus' death that He overcame the power of evil and sin and death. In a great reversal, Jesus' resurrection defeated the power of evil, and it began the restoration of all things. God has a power the world knows nothing about. The way of the world is to get as much power as you can accumulate and to use it for your own advantage. But Jesus wasn't interested in that, and He turned the power scale upside down. He said that greatness is measured not by being first but by taking the last place, by one's commitment to little children, and by toughness with oneself but gentleness with others. Jesus saw power as something to be used in the service of other people, and He leveraged His influence to accomplish the salvation of the world. What a contrast to the way of the world when it comes to power.

III. The Power of God's People Living in Exile.

I mentioned earlier that the American church is now in a season of exile, and we've lost much of the influence in our culture we once enjoyed. We're no longer in a position of power like we once were, and our voice is now a minority.

Christian truth and Christian values aren't shared by most people anymore, so the need for us to learn and practice the subversive power of Jesus is all the more important and necessary these days.

It's not the first time the people of God have lost their influence in the culture, and in each instance before God used the season of exile to teach His people important truths about their relationship with Him and how He wanted them to be a witness. He also used their exile to teach them how to depend on the Lord in a new way, about the subversive nature of the kingdom of God, and how the Lord could use them despite their loss of power. Study the lives of Joseph, Moses, Daniel, and Esther in the Bible, and you'll discover a pattern we would do well to follow. If you read about these people, you'll see that you don't have to be the dominant force in a culture to still have influence, and you'll also discover that often it's when God's people were in a minority that their faith was the strongest and their witness the most vibrant.

The story of the early church is a remarkable example of this truth. On the day of Pentecost, God poured out His Holy Spirit on a small group of people who were huddled together in an upper room, and 3,000 people responded to a sermon Peter preached in the streets of Jerusalem that day and gave their lives to Christ. In the early days of the church's existence it was persecuted minority which was attacked by both the Jewish and Roman authorities, but in spite of this hardship the church continued to grow and flourish and thrive. It didn't need to be accepted by the culture in order to prosper. Often it was because the church was marginalized that it drew its strength from the Lord and became more distinctive and set apart as a glorious expression of the kingdom of God right here on earth.

Let me give you an example. During the reign of Marcus Aurelius around 165 AD, an epidemic of what may have been smallpox killed somewhere between a quarter and a third of the population of the world, including Marcus Aurelius himself. Less than a century later came a second epidemic, in which at its height 5,000 people were reported dying every day in the city of Rome alone.

For the most part, people responded in panic. But there was in that world a marginalized community of Christians who remembered they followed a man who would touch lepers while they were unclean and who told His disciples to go and heal the sick. A bishop in the third century by the name of Dionysius wrote about their actions during the plagues. He said, "Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need, and ministering to them in Christ. And with them departed this life serenely happy, for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors, and cheerfully accepting their pains."³ Whenever Christian communities respond to the sick and hungry, the world takes notice.

Jesus ruled not from a throne but from a cross. His reign was a reign of love, not of force. And His goal was to love people, not use them for His own purposes. The power Jesus exercised was a redemptive power, a saving power. It was the power of love. He didn't use it for His own good; He used His power for the good of others. That's a pattern all of us should remember, whatever our calling may be. Believers are encouraged to receive power from the hand of God, whenever it comes our way, and to use it under the rule of God for the benefit of others. That's what Jesus did, and it's what the early church did too.

Conclusion.

What about you and me? Let's bring this message home to where you and I live. In what circumstance do you find yourself this morning? Have you been on the short end of a power play -- at school, at work, or in your family? Have others abused their power and taken advantage you? Take comfort in knowing that Jesus has been there, too, and draw hope from the fact that He can help you overcome even this disappointment in your life. He knows, and He cares. So look to Him to help you cope with this situation.

A second question I want to ask is what do you do when you're the most powerful person in the room, even as an exile? Whether you're a parent, a supervisor, a teacher, or a big brother or sister, how will you use the power you have in wise and prudent ways? How do you need to repent of your own abuse of power, and what will you do differently in the future with the influence God has given you?

Finally, in this time when the church has lost much of the power it had in the past, do we look back longingly to a day gone by and yearn to be back in the driver's seat? Or can we let go of the past and embrace this new day God has given us when He obviously wants to do a new thing in the church? Can we embrace this season of exile as a time for the refining of our faith and to strip away what is extraneous to following Jesus?

Throughout history whenever the church was dominant in the culture, it always bred nominalism. Eventually, people weren't very serious about their faith, and they began to take God for granted. Often their spiritual apathy led to great compromise both spiritually and morally. But in seasons of exile the people of God always got more serious about their faith, and they knew He was their only hope. The spiritual lines of demarcation were more clearly drawn when times were tough, and it was no longer fashionable to be a follower of Christ.

It is troubling to me that through the night of Jesus' trials no one stood up and said "no" to the bullying. No one in the Sanhedrin, not Pilate, and not one of the soldiers. No one spoke up or did the right thing. Someone once said, "The only thing necessary for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing." And Martin

Luther King, Jr. said, “We will not remember the voices of our critics as much as the silence of our friends.”

We all have a voice. We all have more influence and power than we realize to do the right thing. The question is: Will we use it in the right way? May God give us the grace and courage we need for such a time as this – even in our season of exile. Amen.

¹Richard Foster, *Money, Sex and Power*, pp. 10, 175.

²Quote of lobbyist William Bennett, cited by Baseball Commissioner Fay Vincent once in an interview.

³Quoted by Rodney Start in his book *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force*, chapt. 4.