

FRANKLIN CONGREGATIONAL-CHRISTIAN CHURCH, UCC

Sermon for Sunday, September 29, 2024

Most days, the news carries stories that in some way or other, involve abuse of power – they might be about financial abuses, political abuses, business abuses, family abuses.

So a question today I ask you – do you think you're a powerful person? Before you answer, please understand I'm not talking about power on a political level, financial level, or physical level. Rather I'm speaking about the ability to influence another to do your will.

Defined like that, some will answer 'yes' - our youngsters need to be disciplined after all. Growing up, my younger sister was difficult – but she learned to twist the truth and sometimes outright lie. Sometimes my parents caught her acts, but not always.

Some may answer yes if you think about your marriage – my grandfather had great power over my grandmother – how he dolled out money to her I'd never have put up with. He definitely was the dominant personality and my grandmother had little recourse but to comply with his desires.

Man of us have some power over others – in seminary we were taught that as clergy we would find ourselves in situations where we had to watch for power struggles – sometimes the congregation members would struggle with one another or with a pastor. This might involve passive-aggressive behaviors, blaming, undermining or even sabotage.

When I took an ethics course in seminary, one of the first things the professor said to the class was, "churches can be the most unholy places you'll ever find yourselves in." I didn't believe that, but through many ministerial situations, I can affirm his statement to be true.

Often, whenever 2 people get together, a certain amount of power can be present. The Ten Commandments illustrates this matter of power. Generally we say, the first 4 commandments refer to our responsibilities to God – while the last 6 to our responsibilities to one another.

- Honor your father and mother. In other words, be respectful to one's parents – today, with families so separated, I think it's important to be respectful to all people – their age.
- You shall not murder – not only shall we not take another's life, but expanded – we ought not to beat down another with our words leaving them with little self-respect.
- You shall not commit adultery – breaking this commandment is an abuse of power as your partner trusts you.
- You shall not steal – stealing that which belongs to another shows the power you reveal over another.
- You shall not bear false witnesses – it's pretty simple, don't lie or tell false stories about someone.
- You shall not covet – coveting is a doorway to the abuse of power.

In our reading from Esther today, we learn that of which humans are capable. It's about a man holding a position of power which he planned to use for his own ends.

At the time of this story, the Persians conquered Babylon where the Jewish people were held captive. The Persians released the prisoners, though many chose to remain in Persia.

Then a king, Ahasuerus comes to the throne and marries a beautiful young woman named Esther – without realizing she is Jewish. She had been raised by an older cousin Mordecai – after Esther becomes queen, Mordecai passes info to her and she warns the king. The king has the schemers executed and rewards Mordecai.

Among the king's inner circle is a man named Haman. He has wealth and power and doesn't like Mordecai. Haman doesn't know Esther and Mordecai are related, nor that Esther is Jewish. Haman plots against Mordecai and all the Jews living in Persia trying to convince the king to eliminate the whole Jewish nation.

But Mordecai discovers the plot, tells Esther who intercedes with the king and Haman is executed. There is a Jewish festival still celebrated today to commemorate this event – the feast of Purim.

The Bible is full of power over stories like the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

People who have studied power over situations have come up with 6 bases from which it can arise...

- Have information another needs
- Coercion – can punish another when one doesn't responds as you desire
- Reward – can reward when another does what you want
- Authority – someone can demand you respond positively
- Charisma – ones personality is so forceful or manipulative they can get you to do what they want
- Blackmail – one can expose another to embarrassment or other social cost.

Many temptations are ultimately about the misuse of power.

Reinhold Niebuhr was an American pastor, professor, and author. Associated with our denomination, he was greatly respected and listened to by politicians during WWII, the Cold War, and after. One of his key conclusions is that there are times, both as a nation and as individuals when we need to exercise power – times when it is the right thing to do – but we should do so being aware that the use of power is inevitably corrupting. In other words, every act of power, no matter how much good it may do, causes some injury to others and to the one exercising it. He said that people must act nonetheless, but should seek forgiveness for the harm done in the service of good.

Whether you agree with Niebuhr's opinion or not, his conclusion does remind us of the complexity of human interactions and ought to make us cautious about how we use the power we hold.

We also remember that a symbol of Christianity, the cross, is a symbol of both powerlessness and off power. As an instrument of execution, it symbolizes powerlessness. When empty, it reminds us of the power of God.

We are called to pretend we have no power, but to consider carefully how and when we use it. Power is a gift from God and we need to be good

stewards of it. We need to regard power as a trust from God and we are to use it wisely. We are to use it compassionately and let it reflect our deepest heartfelt love. Thanks be to God. Amen.