

Sermon for Sunday, November 24, 2014 Christ the King Sunday Jeremiah 23:1-6 & Luke 23:33-43 "Power"

What does power look like? It's a fair question, given the fact that this is Christ the King Sunday. You talk about kings, you naturally start thinking about power. So what does power look like?

If you're a political animal, you have seen lots of symbols of power, from the marksman with the rocket-propelled grenade launcher atop the White House protecting the president and his staff, to the flurry of aides who surround congressional leaders and feed them papers with bullet points on them on all manner of topics, to the sleek lobbyists who wear two thousand dollar suits and wine and dine other powerful people to persuade them to support their issue.

If you're in the money business, symbols of power might be the ability to move markets by directing brokers to push a particular stock, or it might take a different form; you might be head of the Federal Reserve and control interest rates.

If you're in the military, power is related to rank, to the role you fulfill in the hierarchy. If you're a general, people snap to attention when you enter a room. You might have a driver, you might command thousands of troops, you might influence the President to follow a particular path in a military conflict.

Our children even understand power in the schools. When the teacher says you have to do something, you had better do it, or there will be consequences. If the bully on the schoolyard demands your lunch money, you had best hand it over. If one of the mean girls in middle school decides you are a nerd, she can marshal her cohorts to tease you mercilessly.

Power. We hear the word, and a plethora of images like these pop up in our minds. I'd note that many of these are not positive, because most of us fear power. Power has been used against us in the past, and we worry that we will be its victim again.

If you're a fan of the television program "Scandal," you can see the misuse of power at the highest levels every week, and you can cheer on the beautiful but stressed-out Olivia Pope as she battles against the powerful forces who block her relationship with President Grant. Granted, it is an illicit relationship, but powerful people get to have what they want, so what's a little marriage, particularly to an unpleasant woman like Mellie Grant, to get in the way of true love between the beautiful and the powerful?

Power can be political, financial, defined by social class, enforced by physical strength or strength of office. It can be coercive in nature or can simply be influence. It can be directly used, or it can be delegated. Just think of the phrase "Wait till you father gets home..." Now that's power.

But let's be clear on one thing: when you think of kings, you cannot help but think of power.

In the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah this morning, we hear about power, don't we? Jeremiah describes a fierce king out of the line of David who will reclaim all that which is his, all of the scattered flock of the nation of Israel. He is the Lord, a king of righteousness.

What does the picture look like? A tall, muscular, avenging king – maybe you'd cast Matthew McConaughey if it were a movie – maybe riding on a white stallion – no wait, there weren't stallions back then in the desert – no, how about a camel? – not regal enough...carried on a litter – no, makes him look weak...

No, this King is striding in long, strong strides across the hot desert, not even sweating, and the soldiers he commands strive to keep up his fierce pace. Yes, now we're talking about a King! Now we're talking about power. And this was precisely the kind of king that the people of Israel had been praying for when Jesus came on the scene. A king of righteousness who actually looked the part.

But looks aren't everything, as our grandmothers said. And powerful people don't always look so impressive. Think of short little Napoleon Bonaparte. Think of dweeby Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of FaceBook. Think of Senator Mitch McConnell. Think of Janet Yellen, who is about to replace Ben Bernanke as chair of the Federal Reserve. She looks like your grandma, only without the kitchen apron.

And then we have Jesus.

A country boy, out of the Galilee, so he speaks with that Galilean accent, just like our folks from the hills and the hollers. Despite all the images of him we've seen painted and sculpted by artists, he's probably about average height for those people in that time, maybe 5 foot 5 or so. He's probably got fairly dark skin and curly hair. So much for the famous glamour shot portrait of Jesus with sandy hair and blue eyes by Warner Sallman in the 1940s, which looks remarkably like Matthew McConaughey. In the Gospel of Matthew, when the soldiers come for Jesus, they have to ask which one he is, because he looks pretty much the same as all his disciples. An average looking guy.

Not Matthew McConaughey. Sorry, Matthew McConaughey fans out there.

Well, okay. He doesn't look powerful. But he must convey his power in some way, because he's a king and kings are powerful. Jeremiah has described him as righteous and fearful, able to turn the tide of history.

Well, Jeremiah has one vision, and the gospel writer Luke has something very different. Dead man walking, or at least a soon to be dead man hanging on a cross. Beaten, bleeding, gasping a bit for breath, since when one is crucified, one dies by asphyxiation. The arms are extended and are supporting the body's weight and thus one cannot take a deep breath. When you no longer have the strength to lift yourself up so you can take a breath, you die. And it takes a while. And it is considered the death sentence of the ignominious, not the powerful. A king would not be crucified.

But this king was.

He was hanging there, alongside of a couple of petty thieves. Having a brief, gasping conversation.

Not much power in that image, eh? And yet... What does Jesus say? "Today you will be with me in paradise." Not the sort of promise a failed leader would make. Not the sort of promise that someone who was powerless could make. No, it is the certain statement of one who has the power to make it happen. A king. The king.

There's power there, in an improbable king, one who looks nothing like Matthew McConaughey. One who looks more like an amateur who went five rounds in the ring with Muhammed Ali. One who is on the verge of death.

And yet, a king. And the key is power. Not the power of the world, of generals and lobbyists and schoolyard bullies. A different kind of power.

If we think of it in terms of directions, this is not the kind of power where you look up to see it, turning your face toward the majesty of the king on the throne high above you. No, for this kind of power you look down to someone who is beneath you, or so you think. Someone who is, as Isaiah said, despised, rejected. Someone who seems as unkingly as you can possibly imagined.

And yet there is something in this man that causes you to think, "Here is righteousness. Here is kingship. Here is power."

It is the power of those who pursue that which is right, that which is of God, regardless of what the world thinks of them. It is the power that is not a result of lineage or election or money or fame, but of a pure heart and of love. It is the power that was invested in leaders like Nelson Mandela, like Dorothy Day, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is the power of the weak made strong through God working within them. It is the reign of Christ lived out once again in ordinary people, seemingly without any power as the world would judge them, who worked against entrenched systems of worldly power with no weapon except the virtues, the moral values that they learned from Christ.

Christ is King. He is a powerful mighty King. But he redefines power in his reign not for personal gain but for the common good. He asks us to use his lessons of power to continue to seek the common good. Take on his power, the power of love, the power of justice, the power of mercy, and bring his reign to fruition in this time and this place, in ways both dramatic and ordinary, every day. Use his power as it was meant to be used, not in aspiring to earthly glory but to bring heavenly glory to the earth. Celebrate his kingship by living as he asked us to live, using his power to help the powerless. Amen.