

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.19.21

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” (180)

Power and what to do with it: this is what we’re talking about today.

I wonder how you feel about power. Do you want it? Do you not want it? Do you feel you have power, and enjoy that—or do you fear that? Do you feel you don’t have power, and resent that—or find relief in that?

I remember being a young adult, and realizing Christianity is largely about power. We—we Christians—talk a lot about power. I’d never noticed before; I’d prayed the Lord’s Prayer my whole life, and never noticed that a key theme there is power. “...for thine is the kingdom, the *power*, and the glory forever.”

Granted, this is an interpolation. This final phrase: it’s something added on, not original to the prayer Jesus is remembered to have given in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. It’s from 16th century England, a doxology, a Protestant addition, which is why Catholics tend not to include it when they pray. And I like this doxology, add-on that it is. I like “evil” not being the last word. But it does make it so “power” is a word more often on our lips than words such as these, also Christian essentials, “faith” and “hope” and “love.”

More generally, the founder of our faith is remarkable first in the world because of his doing “deeds of power.” Altering a natural course of things, he could perform a deed of power and thus stop a storm in its tracks or an illness from proceeding as illnesses do.

The conversation we remembered just now, as they went on from there and passed through Galilee, followed an event power. During this, Peter and James and John were walking along, passing through Galilee having just come down the mountain up which Jesus had brought them. There, Jesus was transfigured before them. Made light. His clothes made white. Appearing with Moses and Elijah, Jesus was as if himself to be understood as equal to Moses, and thus to the

law of freedom and equality under God, equal also to Elijah, and thus to the prophetic tradition of justice and mercy.

To crown the event a voice came from a shining cloud, “This is my Son the beloved; listen to him.”

And I’ve supposed that what they were to listen to was the very next thing he was remembered to have said, that the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again. “*Listen to him. Listen to him say this.*”

That they managed not to is little surprise. That they managed not to hear, to say nothing of understand, this is little surprise. It simply didn’t make sense that someone with access to such power would go on to suffer being betrayed into human hands. What mindless and merciless machinations the likes of us humans do come up with to handle people and situations that are inconvenient, upsetting: that Jesus, glorious Jesus, would suffer such as these?

It simply *doesn’t* make sense. No one with actual power ever lets it go—not without a fight. And anyone with actual power doesn’t really have to fight. The power itself wins without a fight.

On this point, there’s no one more honest than O’Brien. The face of the Party in 1984, O’Brien is George Orwell’s creation, the only person we ever meet who represents the Party, which is otherwise a totally disembodied, dislocated holder of all power, exerciser of all power. And who knows? Maybe O’Brien is the Party, the whole of it.

He explains it to his victim, Winston, whose cruel world has closed in on him—cruel, and all-seeing but never seen. This world of Big Brother, it is everywhere but nowhere, ever-watching, ever-surveilling, but never submitting to being revealed. It knows what you think before you think it and is ready to punish you for having had that thought. It is ready also to wear away at your relationships for their being private and shared, spaces of trust and confidence—for there is to be no privacy under the watch of the Party, except for the privacy of the Party. There is to be no intimacy, no trust—for any such things would drain power from the Party, and the Party is to be the sole holder of all power.

But why?

O’Brien explains it, first by asking the question he assumes Winston has, or he forces upon Winston to ask: “What is the Party’s motive? Why should the Party want power?”

See, Winston’s not even free enough to know his own mind, to explore freely his own wondering. No, even what he wonders about will be forced upon him, though to wonder about

this question is itself ground for punishment. So he'll be punished for a thought he was forced to have.

And the answer to this forced question is this: "The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake." O'Brien explains, "We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power.

"What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from all the oligarchies of the past in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal.

"We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship.

"The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power.

Now do you begin to understand?"

It's true. It is tragically, painfully, sinfully true—except...

...there is one who exercised power with the intention of relinquishing it.

There is one who had access to absolute power, and exercised it with the mission of then pouring it out. A radical self-giving. An astonishing kenosis, which is say self-emptying.

There is one who effected a revolution, though not to establish a dictatorship, instead to establish the church, a worldwide network of people in covenant with one another for the sake of love, for the sake of likewise self-emptying, power gathered to be spent in service of one another, friend and neighbor and stranger alike.

There is one, and we intend to be like him.

We often aren't. We often fail. History is littered with attempts and failure—because power is itself so powerfully addictive. As soon as it's gathered, even for the sake of Christ, it begins to justify itself, to become its own end. Power not gathered to be put to the service of good news, which is for all; power not gathered for the sake of building up the reign of God in our midst, but

for its own purpose and for the glory of the one who wields it: it's that addictive. All that dopamine released when you exercise power. All that dope: it's that addictive.

Think about it. Think about all those popes and princes, all those Napoleons and Mussolinis, all those Weinsteins of Hollywood and Sacklers of industry, and the wolves of Wall Street, and the Trumps of the grift and kitsch, our very own Trump rising to the pinnacle of worldly power and then losing his mind at the prospect of having to let it go, unleashing mindless violence in order not to have to let it go, stirring up the most unmoored among us not to have to come to terms with letting it go. Talk about a mind damaged by power.

Then think about what Jesus did, aglow on a mountain, and then wandering into some nothing village, entering into some hovel of a house, where his disciples argued about who among them would be third tier to Jesus, and Moses and Elijah—and then them, though which of them, Peter or James or John, or one of the others? And Jesus then taking a child, who was as nothing, unable to do much of anything of power—Jesus taking that child and saying, “Here is what I am for.”

This is our God, to quote Isaiah. This is the one for whom we have waited, to quote the prophet who imagined such a world where power seeks not itself but seeks the good. This is the one whom we are to follow, in whose likeness we are to form ourselves as a gathered body. This is the one in whose image we are to be formed as a gathered body seeking the good, whatever such seeking might cost ourselves.

And this is why we come again to this place, to hear again this word that Jesus was and is: because the world will tell us another story, and it will glitter and entice, and it will humiliate and punish, and it will justify such things as just the way it is. It's hard to resist this world. It's hard to discipline yourself so you can be set to good purpose and have good effect, to be renewed in hope that any such thing might matter at all.

It does.

Find your power; take it up. Exercise it in joy for the sake of what's good. Exhaust it and gather it again. There are so many ways to serve the good.

Thanks be to God.