

Christians, Closets, Power Politics

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According to the Gospel of Luke – and Matthew, too – there were three points during Jesus’ ministry when the temptations to seize power and become king were very real options. There was that time when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane (on Maundy Thursday). The soldiers came to arrest Jesus, and Peter was there with sword in hand ready for the rebellion to begin. That was the military might option. Then there was the moment earlier that week (on Palm Sunday) during Jesus’ triumphant entrance riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, with the crowds shouting words that were long-associated with the arrival of a king, “Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” He entered the Temple, cleared the courtyard, and was ready, as many hoped, to claim his Father’s house as his springboard to power, the theocratic rule option. Finally, or should I say, first of all, there is this morning’s text, the economic option, where Jesus was offered a ride to power on the premise of promising an economic miracle – bread for all, feeding the multitudes.

The language in our Gospel text in John 6:15 is unusually explicit. The miracle was well-received, perhaps with a little much too much enthusiasm. “When Jesus realized that they were about to take him through the force of their will to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” These three routes to ruling – the military, economic, and theocratic options for coming to power – were taken up by Luke (and Matthew) under the heading of the *temptations of Christ* (Luke 4 and Matthew 4), when he was up in the mountains and deep in the wilderness battling Satan, tempted to turn stones into bread (the economic miracle option), to bow down to Satan and accept Satan’s terms for power (the military might option), and to use the temple as a springboard to power (the theocratic option). Jesus rejected them then before his ministry began; and he is rejecting them now during the course of his ministry, as well.

Sometimes, things aren’t what they seem, especially when it comes to matters of power and politics. Sometimes, it seems like someone is helping us when they’re really helping themselves. We’re familiar with hidden agendas and master manipulators, partly because we know the skills of using others to accomplish our aims, and partly because we’ve experienced being used as a means to someone else’s aims. You know the golden rule of the worldly wise: do unto others ... before they do unto to you! Well, Jesus opts out of these schemes from the beginning. When it comes to Jesus’ embracing the role of being the Christ, it’s not about the power he wants to accumulate, but the service he wants to render. He’s not trying to rule the world. He’s just trying to serve the Lord, to live as God’s faithful servant. This can be a very hard lesson to learn; but Jesus stands his ground up in the mountain out in the wilderness, and in the real world where kings are made and kingdoms established.

He will not ride to power on promises to work economic miracles. He will not wield the sword of military might to political victory. He will not use religion as a means to gaining earthly power. He was called at Baptism (in Mark 1) to be God's Son, God's Servant. That's the course he'll take and the cause he'll pursue through to the end. He did not come to be served, but to serve. It is not control but peace that he seeks. It is not the power to compel by force, but the freedom to love and serve that is his cause, his aim and his end. From Baptism to the Cross, his understanding of his call as God's Son and Servant was consistent, coherent, and clear: it would not be through the force of earthly might but through the power of divine love that God's kingdom would come. God desires worship, not sacrifice; and true worship is about learning to love God through serving others, not using God to get others to serve us.

There was a funny moment in our Adult Sunday School Class a couple of Sundays ago when we were discussing the long-standing tradition in the mainstream of Christianity – ever since the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian in 312 C.E. – to accept as given the very forms of power and paths to power that Jesus regarded as temptations to be resisted and rejected in our Gospel narratives. In other words, Christians, for the most part, are comfortable with the influence we enjoy and the power we possess. We were talking about expressions of peace-making in the early Church, and Chuck Danner reminded us that there are Lutherans today who still hold to the view that military might and political power are not the methods or the means that Jesus taught as the way to true life. So, speaking figuratively, I responded by telling Charlie that his views were fine as long as when he felt the need to speak about them that he confined himself to one of the three closets in Luther Hall, preferably the smallest one. I didn't actually want him to stand in the closet. I was just making the point that mainstream Christianity, whether we're talking about Constantinian Catholicism or Magisterial Protestantism – a distinction that refers to the Catholic Church since the conversion of Constantine, and Protestants like Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Henry VIII, reformers who didn't challenge the political clout they inherited with the Reformations they led – anyway, mainline Christians, be they Catholic or Protestants, have accepted as legitimate the very paths Jesus rejected, and have relegated to the periphery the witness of Christians who have found Jesus' rejection of the economic, military, and theocratic options persuasive.

The genius of traditional Catholic responses to reform movements through the centuries was to carve out a room in the sprawling mansion called the Church for idealists and other monastic movements that found the increasing worldliness of the Christian Church spiritually objectionable. There were Augustinians in the 5th Century, Franciscans in the 13th Century, and many others along the way. The witness of these leaders was preserved, but not regarded as normative for all Christians. Magisterial Protestants – like Lutherans, Reformed, Presbyterians, and Anglicans – often devote small sections tucked away in indices found in the back of textbooks to describe the importance of off-the-beaten-track movements and minority voices in the church, which, while intellectually interesting, are practically unimportant for the mainstream, where the burdens of Christian responsibility

involve embracing and exerting the influence we have come to possess in ways that might secure aims we regarded good for our nation, and through our nation for the world.

The first paper I ever wrote for an academic presentation was entitled “What Does Jesus of Nazareth Have to Do with Christian Ethics?” The question I raised seems to be very basic stuff; but the problem this paper addressed focused on what, if anything, we actually know about Jesus. Two thousand years of historical filters have turned Jesus into little more than a paragon of platitudes. The stuff we often hear being lifted up by preachers on radio and television is often not very substantive. Jesus is *perfectly loving*, *perfectly faithful*, *perfectly human*, like us in every way, except by being *perfectly sinless*. These are the traits, it seems, that make Jesus God’s only Son, God’s chosen Servant – loving God as surely we should, and loving us as only God can: the perfect man, our perfect God, all in one. The trouble is that these descriptions tell us very little about who Jesus was, and what it was about his life that led to his death, that made his death *his* death, directly related to the life he lived. Our Gospel text makes it clear that Jesus was pretty insistent on living his life and fulfilling his mission on his own terms. He resisted conventional approaches to gaining power and establishing his kingdom. So, he withdrew by himself back to the mountain by himself when the crowds sought to make him king based on the promise of more economics miracles – a chicken in every pot, bread aplenty and fish for all. But those weren’t the terms Jesus sought. We need to know more about the terms Jesus sought (and lived). What was it about his choices that formed his life, and how did his living lead to his dying, and what was it about the connection between his living and his dying that inspired God through the sign of the Resurrection to say, “He’s the One. That’s my Man! His is the way that leads to true life. Listen to him.”

The bread in this morning’s Gospel is important, and we’ll have a chance to talk more about that over the course of a month-full of Sundays. This morning, however, our focus has been on why Jesus withdrew when the crowd sought to make him king. Every four or eight years, an outsider rides into Washington on the promise of hope for change. But all that really changes is which parties get paid by politicians drawing on the public trough. The difference between right and wrong among the powerful today is simply making sure that your party gets paid whether right or left sit on the throne. Well, Jesus chose not to play that game, and he surely paid for the choices he made. The questions we have raised today are these. How did Jesus’ choices form his life? What did his living have to do with his dying? What’s the connection between his living and dying that led to heaven’s affirmation that He was the One, the Man, the Christ, the King? Jesus didn’t reject the heavenly goal, only the worldly means that didn’t work to accomplish the new creation he desired. Before I end, let me just say that I celebrated a birthday this week. One of the cards I received offered a bit of worldly wisdom with it. “Don’t worry about turning another year older. I heard that birthdays are a good thing. Those who have the most birthdays live the longest!” Our point today has been to say that when it comes to following Jesus, it’s not how long we live, but how we live. Our call is to live our lives in the way that leads to true life, that life that is ours as we live ... in Jesus’ Name. Amen