

The Left-Handed Power of the Cross

April 10, 2009

(Good Friday)

John 18:1-19:42

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Twenty years ago, when I was a businessman, I had just taken a new position as the controller of an employee benefits company in Houston.

The executive offices, including mine, were on the top floor of our office building.

One day, my boss, who was the founder and the CEO of the company, came into my office.

My boss explained to me that there were some problems in one of our departments downstairs.

The Vice President of this division had just hired her grown daughter to work in the department, and the daughter was taking advantage of the situation and creating problems among her co-workers.

Then, my boss told me - that I was going to move my office downstairs and the Board was putting me in-charge of that entire division.

At the time, I was only 25 years old, and greener than grass.

But I wanted to prove myself to the company and to my boss.

So, my office was moved downstairs.

And almost immediately, the young daughter of the Vice President began acting up by coming into work late.

In response, I set up strict policies for every employee in the department.

Every employee had to sign in and out of the office.

Every employee had to be at their desk, ready to work, by 8 am.

And sure enough, a few days later, this young woman came into work at 9 o'clock.

I immediately called her into my office.

She looked across my desk at me and began to make excuses about how she had car troubles that morning.

I once again reiterated the new policy that all employees be at work by

8am.

She battled with me and told me that her mother had hired her, and that I could not tell her what to do.

Infuriated, I asked her:

“Don’t you realize that I have the power to fire you?”

She shot back:

“You have no power.

You were just sent down here as a puppet to get rid of me.”

To which I replied:

“You’re fired!”

Jesus stands in front of Pontius Pilate as Pilate asks Jesus:

“Don’t you realize that I have the power to release you and the power to crucify you?”

And Jesus shoots back:

“You have no power over me unless it had given to you from above.”

We all want power.

We want the power to impress our boss and to fire a brazen employee who comes in an hour late.

We want the power to control and to heal and to get the results that we want, when we want them.

We want the power to release and the power to crucify.

Robert Capon is an Episcopal priest who has written a set of excellent books about the parables of Jesus.

Robert Capon’s books are a companion to me whenever I teach and preach about the parables.

What I like about Robert Capon is that he always turns my understandings upside down and makes me think of things in new ways.

In order to lay out a new understanding of the parables of Jesus, Capon borrows ideas from Martin Luther as Capon sets out two different ways to look at power:

Right-handed power vs. left-handed power.

Right-handed power is about logic and rules and demands.

Right-handed power is direct, intervening, forceful, bookkeeping power.

Right-handed power means that if you are an hour late to work, then you will be fired.

Right-handed power means that if you claim to be the Son of God, then you will be crucified.

Robert Capon and Martin Luther, however, believe that the kingdom of God is ruled by left-handed power.

Left-handed power respects, trusts and nurtures the other person.

Left-handed power forgives and sacrifices and restores broken relationships.

Left-handed power says that if you are nailed to the cross, then you don't come down from the cross to kick Pilate's you-know-what.

Left-handed power says that if you nailed to the cross, then you are to love and forgive.

For left-handed power is truly the power of the Cross.

In the Gospel of John that we read this evening, these two types of power, right-handed and left-handed power, meet face to face.

Jesus stands in front of Pontius Pilate.

And Pilate asks Jesus:

“Don't you realize that I have the power to release you and the power to crucify you?”

And Jesus shoots back:

“You have no power over me.”

Every day of our lives, Pilate and Jesus meet face to face.

Every day, the powers of this world meet face to face with the power of the cross.

And the choice is whether we will use bookkeeping, tit for tat, right-handed power

Or whether we will use sacrificial, self-giving, left-handed power.

In my own life, since I have a son who is entering college in a few months,

The powers of the world, the powers on Wall Street, have been taunting me lately, saying:

“Don’t you realize that I have the power to wipe out all of your college savings?”

A right-handed power response is for me to react out of fear and to cut back on my giving to God through St. Alban’s Church.

However, a left-handed power response is for me to increase my pledge-

And to carry the cross of Jesus Christ onto the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, proclaiming:

“You have no power over me.”

Yesterday, I read an article in a sports magazine about Eddie Reese, the swimming coach at the University of Texas.

The magazine article spoke about how Coach Reese and his wife, Elinor, live out their strong faith through their work with the homeless and the poor in Austin.

The magazine article says that Coach Reese has often co-signed leases on apartments for newly-released prisoners.

And he has often opened up his ample home as a place for the homeless to live while they get their feet back on the ground.

Immediately, I found myself with a visceral right-handed power response:

“Don’t you realize that those homeless people have the power to steal you blind?”

“Don’t you realize that those newly-released prisoners have the power to jump parole and leave you stuck with their lease agreements?”

Yet, Coach Reese and his wife have chosen to respond to Pilate and to the powers of this world by proclaiming:

You have no power, no power, to keep us from sacrificing - and opening up our home to all of God’s people.

You have no power to keep us from loving - by co-signing leases to give others a second chance.

You have no power to keep us from being nailed - by the power of the Cross.

Every day, each of us meet face to face with the power of Pontius Pilate,
who asks us:

Don't you realize that I have the power to fire you?

Don't you realize that I have the power take away your children and
your jobs and your homes and your money?

Don't you realize that I have the power to crucify you?

And to the powers of this world, we reply:

You have no power to keep me from stretching out my arms upon the
hard wood of the cross.

You have no power, no power, to separate me from love.

AMEN.

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