

# Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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*May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our humility and our reconciliation. Amen.*

For as long as people have been in relationship with God, they have also spent an enormous amount of time, breath, and energy trying to wield power as though they were God.

- So let me begin this sermon with one of my favorite prayers that I say to ground myself in reality:
  - “You are not God, I am not God, thanks be to God.”
- However, It seems to me that there is this unavoidable obsession with using faith for the purpose of power, and it shows up in various ways in this morning’s passages from scripture.
  - Now, you might be thinking “didn’t the scripture passages tells us ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself?’” How is that about power and control?
    - Well, let me provide you all with a bit of backstory.
    - I grew up as the child of a Lutheran Pastor as well as a Lutheran Youth leader. So, all my Sundays and most of my summer vacations were spent at the church my parents worked at.
    - My upbringing was mostly spent in very homogenous communities in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa.
    - I eventually discerned a call to ministry while I was a student in high school, and spent my college years studying to earn a degree in religion before attending seminary and later becoming ordained.
      - But, it was in my college experience where I was first exposed to experiences of faith beyond my cushy midwestern Lutheran upbringing.
        - And the more I studied and learned, the more stories I encountered it seemed that there were

more instances of people using faith and the church to gain power, rather than to love as we are commanded.

- There was no better example of this in my studies than when I read the works and theology of a German Lutheran Pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
  - Bonhoeffer grew up in a tumultuous time in Germany, witnessed the Hitler and the Third Reich's rise to power.
    - And this inspired him and many other pastors in the country to form *Die Bekennende Kirche*. In English: The Confessing Church.
  - This coalition of churches and their pastors confessed against the evils of the powers that be and took a stance opposing Hitler and the extremists who followed him.
  - However, years after it formed, an overwhelming majority of the churches who made up the original Confessing Church, had walked back on their faithful confessions.
    - And instead publicly pledged their allegiance to Hitler and the State, in hopes that they would gain protections and status in doing so.
    - They walked away from proclaiming God's love, and in doing so enabled the great atrocities of WWII and the Holocaust.
- So, I looked further back in the church's history, to see if the confessing church was just a blip, a brief stain or an anomaly. But what I found was less than encouraging.
- In my home state of South Dakota, I learned the history of Christian boarding schools that kidnapped indigenous children, and tried to quote "kill the Indian to save the man within."
- I read of all the ways that Christians used the words of Jesus to justify the transatlantic Slave trade where the dignity and very humanity of individuals was forcefully stripped away.
- I learned of the Crusades and "holy wars" purely about seizing land and maintaining power and control for the empire.

- Eventually, though, I thought I had found the source of the problem. Roman Emperor Constantine who more or less made Christianity the main religion of Rome.
  - With this adoption, there was a shift from persecution to acceptance. And what was a growing movement of martyrs that resisted all persecution and grew in numbers as a perennial thorn in the Empire's side, became a tool that Constantine capitalized on for the acquisition of power and control.
  - Yet Constantine is not the source of Christianity's Power Problem.
    - Because we can go all the way back to the gospels and hear the stories of the disciples and learn that they had the same issues.
      - Even though they sat at the feet of Jesus and heard him preach a message of love for our neighbors, even though they heard the words directly from the source of all love, they still stubbornly clung to the desire to have power themselves.
      - Right up to his crucifixion, the disciples wanted Jesus to be a warrior king like David. That he might reconquer the land and prove to all how powerful, how great the nation of Israel is.
  - This shows up in today's gospel, where James and John offer to invoke heavenly fire to punish a Samaritan village that wouldn't receive Jesus.
    - To James and John, their faith in Jesus was nothing more than a display of power and punishment.
      - Even though Jesus immediately rebukes them, it takes awhile for this to sink in.
        - More than that, Jesus hammers home that it isn't about gaining power, but about humbling yourself for the sake of loving one another.
- I hear this sentiment echoed in Paul's letter to the Galatians
  - This beautiful passage about being set free from the power of the law, for the purpose of loving our neighbors as ourselves.
    - The freedom that we gain in Christ is freedom to love one another.

- And yet, I would be shirking my duty as a preacher this RIC Sunday if I didn't mention how this passage and similar ones have been used as a means to exert power and control.
    - Most often I have heard this passage preached and taught as a means of instilling a pious lifestyle into people
    - As though the whole point of Paul's words were to tell people "don't fornicate, don't drink, don't be angry, jealous, impure, standoffish, or envious. Lest you lose your chance to inherit the kingdom of God"
  - But this interpretation completely misses the mark of Paul's message that he makes abundantly clear:
    - "you are set free for the purpose and sake of loving as Christ did."
    - Paul implores his audience not to use this freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence and personal gain, but through love to become servants to one another.
      - It's not about controlling yourself into piety, but about living a loving lifestyle of service
      - And when we live in such a way, the fruits of Spirit will flourish within and among us.
        - We will become more loving and joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, and gentle.
    - It's a truly upsetting thing that we have turned this passage on the freedom of the spirit into a message of religious control rather than an invitation to live our lives in such a way that all people will flourish and grow in love together.
  - Yes it seems that Christianity has a problem with power.
    - And it does not take very long to notice the ways in which this problem persists even to this day. Especially in the wake of Friday's news, wherein 6 christian Supreme Court Justices used their own personal power to strip away constitutional rights for millions of individuals, and they foreshadowed taking away more in the future.

- Christianity in the USA especially has found a formula to obtain and maintain power, not just for its own sake but to hold that power over others, ignoring Paul's message to not use freedom in Christ as an opportunity for self-indulgence.
  - And this obsession with power has a body count
    - One that, unfortunately seems that it will only continue to grow.
- We continue to live through incredibly trying times. And I do not fault you if you are feeling hopelessness or despair.
  - But I will offer this gentle reminder that we can turn to the example of Christ.
  - The most powerful figure within our faith tradition was powerful not through how he wielded over others, but in how he gave his power up strictly for the purpose of loving and serving others
    - And through the power of the Spirit we are to follow Christ's lead, to let go of our drive to gain power for ourselves, and instead to gain power for each other.
  - The work of discipleship is costly and hard, and it seems that we are in for a long and arduous haul, so my friends
    - Know that you are loved, know that you are set free to love others, and through it all:
    - May we take care that we're not consumed by one another as we commit ourselves to this work of love.