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## *How Does Jesus Use Power?*

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*Psalm 82; John 2:1-12*

I was at a wedding reception recently when the wine began to run low. I was tempted to ask the parents of the bride if they wanted me to get some water, say a prayer, and take care of it...but a poor attempt at humor might not have helped much at that point. Instead, someone quickly drove to the store for supplies, and the guests at the party never knew what happened.

That's also true at the wedding party in Cana, 2,000 years ago. Only the servants know what happens in the kitchen. Not even Jesus' mother knows, although when the good wine starts flowing late into the feast she must suspect her son is behind it.

Jesus' first miracle isn't his idea. In fact, that's true of all the miracles of Jesus. Someone presents him with a problem to solve: stop the bleeding, feed the 5,000, bring back sight, heal disease, cure paralysis, exorcise demons. Jesus is a reluctant miracle worker. At the wedding feast in Cana the wine steward is impressed with the vintage, but Mary's son keeps quiet about it.

I preached on this same text in January 2017, during the height of the Syrian refugee crisis. Remember that time? It was just days after the new administration in Washington had announced its policy of refusing entry to Muslims, and the water-into-wine miracle at the wedding feast at that critical moment sounded like a call to show hospitality, to widen the welcome at the party, not to shut it down.

“At the wedding feast in Cana,” I said 20 months ago,

“Jesus launches a movement, a movement of *joyful resistance* against the baser impulses that run through each of us and through the principalities and powers of every time and place.”

That was then, and this is now, and we’re back at the wedding party where the wine runs out, seeing more signs of *the resistance movement that is the gospel*. And today, we’re at yet another critical juncture in our nation’s history, the nomination of a new Supreme Court justice. And now this same text shifts from a lesson in hospitality to a primer on the use of power.

At the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus tries *not* to exercise power. When his mother learns of the wine crisis, she turns to her son to solve it. He’s a grown man, and in that patriarchal system – *as in ours* – he’s in a position of power simply by virtue of his gender. His mother knows he’s capable of taking over and managing things, as men do. But he doesn’t rush in. He has no need to be in control.

That’s the first lesson from this story about how Jesus uses power: *start with humility*. Don’t be too eager to solve everything with your power. Be more modest. Jesus is reluctant to step in, take over, and make everything right. He’s not interested in the use of power to make himself or anyone else look good. *People using power are always tempted to make it so they come out a winner, on top*. Jesus doesn’t use power that way.

When he does finally take action, Jesus exercises power anonymously. He doesn't need everyone to know what he can do, or what he has done. As far as anyone knows, it could have been the servants themselves, those lowest on the rung in that social setting – they were probably enslaved individuals – who found that good wine. Jesus doesn't need to take credit.

Second lesson from this story about how Jesus uses power: *do it for the sake of building up the community, for the good of others, especially those who are most vulnerable. Don't use it to burnish a reputation, or puff up an ego. The gifts Jesus has are considerable, but he knows they aren't for his own aggrandizement. This is not about him. People using power are always tempted to make it about them.* Jesus doesn't use power that way.

When Jesus decides to help with the wine he asks the servants to fill the large stone jars with water. Those jars were reserved for one purpose only: for religious rituals, purification rites – not for holding wedding party wine. His choice of religious vessels to hold the wine shows his willingness to rethink tradition if necessary. *We've always done it that way* doesn't carry much weight with Jesus. Remember when he allowed his followers to glean in the fields and eat on the Sabbath – even though it was prohibited by tradition – because they were hungry? That was the priority for Jesus, not the rules.

Third lesson from this story about how Jesus uses power: *use it to change the status quo, if it makes the world a better place.* So often power is used to defend the way things are, rather than to imagine the way things might be and then make something new happen. That's precisely what Jesus does with those stone jars; some look at them and see religious rituals and rules and a prescribed use. Jesus looks at them and sees jars of good wine for the party.

Structures and systems inevitably work to preserve the power that built them in the first place. *People using power are always tempted to maintain tradition for its own sake, to keep things the way they are.* Jesus doesn't use power that way.

There's a lot to unpack in this little gospel story about a party in Cana long ago. At the wedding feast Jesus shows how to *use power humbly*, to use it *on behalf of the community*, and to use it in a way that *challenges the status quo*.

But that's only the start. He does it again and again. His entire ministry overturns the typical use of power in his time – and, therefore, in our time, if we follow him. When he's in a superior position relative to others Jesus doesn't see that as a chance to exercise leverage, but, rather, to listen and learn and bring healing.

Think of the Samaritan woman at the well, a foreigner, alone with Jesus, a male stranger from another group, who no doubt represents a threat. What happens? They talk about the water they *both* need – his, that which is to be found in the well, and hers, the living water of hope. *They each ask the other for help.* It's mutual. It's balanced.

Think of the Syrophenician woman, another outsider. She asks Jesus to heal her daughter and he refuses, saying his own people deserve to be fed first. Then he adds, cruelly, that food shouldn't be wasted by throwing it to the dogs.

The woman is furious at this, but her fury empowers her. She finds her voice, much as women today who have kept silent about sexual assault and are now speaking up. It shouldn't have to wait until the victim gets angry, but the system is stacked against her.

That's still true. Over the last several weeks the Star-Tribune has been documenting the lack of response to sexual assault – again in this morning's paper, telling the awful story of hundreds of cases not being investigated, let alone solved. Why do our daughters and sisters, our mothers and wives, our co-workers and friends have to live with this?

The Syrophoenician woman, a foreigner, an immigrant with no authority in that system, persists nevertheless. She challenges Jesus, a man in power presiding over a gathering of other men. We watch that exchange unfold in the gospel, much as we did with the two women confronting Senator Flake in the elevator on Friday. You can almost hear the Syrophoenician woman telling Jesus to look her in the eye.

She takes him to task and speaks directly and boldly and courageously to him, not letting him get away with a mean-spirited use of power. Jesus listens, *and believes her* – and he changes his mind and heals her daughter.

Think of the men who follow Jesus getting into a debate about who will be first in the coming kingdom – the guys competing with one another. Jesus rebukes them – and then invites little children to come to him, saying only people who become like children will enter the kingdom of heaven. Give up your privilege, he says, let go of your desire for power, and then you will see the light of God.

As people of faith we're called to exercise power in the way of Jesus, in a way that points to the goodness of God, in a way that spreads the light of God, in a way that leads to the justice of God.

*At its best* our democracy has the potential to offer light in a grim and gloomy world, and spread the most good for the most people. But we're not there yet, in so many ways. This past week offered ample evidence. The Supreme Court hearings exposed the imbalance of power in our social and cultural and political systems. Too many people outside the circle of closely

held power have been silenced for too long, including women and people of color and people who are poor.

The noise echoing across our nation in recent years, and in the halls of Congress this week may show, as former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy said recently, “the decline of democracy.”

(<https://www.newsweek.com/former-justice-anthony-kennedy-warns-democracy-danger-1145017>)

*Or it may be the sound of democracy awakening.*

It may be the cry of those demanding equity and fairness for people outside the places of wealth and advantage. It may be the demand for an end to mistreatment because of gender or race.

It may be the rustling of the Holy Spirit finally getting our attention. Scripture resounds with the cries of the oppressed.

“*How long* will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” God asks through the voice of the poet in Psalm 82.

*How long?*

“Give justice to the weak and the orphan,” God says.

*How long will you judge unjustly?*

“Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute,” God says.

*How long will you show partiality to the wicked?*

“Rescue the weak and the needy,” God insists.

*How long?*

“Deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” (Psalm 82:2-4)

The Hebrew poet expresses the heart of our faith and its urgent plea for justice. Jesus, son of Mary, winemaker in Cana, will embody that same call centuries later. Serving humbly. Listening carefully. Building up the community. Challenging the status quo. Sharing power.

Today you and I, as people of faith living in this land, are challenged to take up that good work, *God’s work* in our time. Those whose voices have not been heard and who have been victims of violence and injustice are now insisting that *we listen*, that those of us who hold privilege and power stop talking and hear their stories, and be changed by them.

As a new day dawns, the rising fear we’re witnessing across the country is the response of those – mostly straight white men in power – whose place in America is shifting, is being challenged by courageous women and others demanding to be heard.

The true test of the *just use of power* is *who benefits from it*. As Jesus makes clear in Cana and throughout his life, those who hold power should not be the ones who gain from its use. There’s no gospel in that, no good news at all.

In fact, as Jesus sees it, it’s just the opposite. Those with power are called either to relinquish it or use it to lift up others – especially those who have been excluded and despised, left out and pushed down, battered and abused – and invite them into the very places where they were not previously welcome.

Then, and only then, will the world shine with the justice of God. Then, and only then, will the light of goodness fill our lives. Then, and only then, will *all God's people, all God's people*, rejoice.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

## **Pastoral Prayer ~10:30 am Worship**

David Shinn

Let us know join our hearts in the pastoral prayer. Let us pray...

O God, our maker, our defender, our redeemer, and our friend, we call upon your Holy Name this day to offer our grateful thanks for your never ending love. We lift up our voices to sing of your power and mercy. We praise you for your stunning creation of the cosmos and the universe. We are filled with gratitude for all your provision for our spirits, our bodies and our minds.

We come into your house this day so we can find sanctuary in your peace, assurance from your love, forgiveness in your grace, conviction from your justice. We thank you for the wideness of your mercy, like the wideness of the sea. For your kindness in your justice, which is more than liberty. For the roominess of your compassion to receive our sorrow.

From your living words, we hear, and are convicted by how you use your power for the common good. Your power to lift up the little ones, build community, and lead all to rethink of status quo and systems. Your consolation to comfort the bereaved, and afflicted. Your compassion for those who have been victimized by those who distort power and privilege for their benefits and gains.

We pray especially for what the last few days in our nation's capital may have unearthed for the victims of sexual assault and violence. We pray for all victims as memories of the trauma haunt them, for the daily reminder of the crime, and for anxiety, depression, guilt and shame they carry.

We name your preferential love for all who are oppressed. We call on Dr. King's words, "your arch of the moral universe is long and it always bend toward justice," and Maya Angelou's words, "Still we rise!" We remember the teaching of Paul that when one member of our body suffers, the whole body suffers. So we pray. May we be the witness and the support for the victims. May we call for justice to flow like a river to eradicate all systemic culture of inequality. May we pray for balm of healing to sooth the broken spirit, heart, and mind. May we walk alongside those who are in pain.

We pray also for the hundreds of casualties and uncounted victims of the tsunami in Indonesia. Lord have mercy upon them as they begin the long road to recovery and relief.

We also pray for families grieving for the death of their loved ones. We pray for all who are living with mental illness. May you bring compassion for their struggles, call on us to offer listening and nonjudgmental presence, and peace in their hearts and minds.

Lord of healing, love and grace, while our hearts are made heavy by the weight of this world's challenges near and far, we are also embolden to spread your goodness, mercy, and justice for all people. We remember you are God and we are not. Be our defender, our redeemer, and our friend as we pray now the prayer that you have taught us all to pray, Our Father...