Power Struggle

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Acts 4:1-13

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We have a crisis of authority on Capitol Hill: record low approval ratings; a profound loss of trust; our elected leaders losing what our Declaration of Independence calls “the consent of the governed.”

Take the Kavanagh hearings that quickly unraveled this week into an embarrassing display of highly partisan, political theater—leaders on both sides using two impassioned testimonies as a shameless grab for power. It was a tawdry display of American politics at its worst.

We confuse power with authority. Power is the raw ability to make things happen. Unchecked power utilizes force and intimidation to get their way. It is tempting to use power to dominate people. An armed robber has power but no authority.

Authority is the moral right to do something. Authority is never coercive. No one can command authority. It has to be earned. Power without authority amounts to tyranny. Jesus lays aside all claims to worldly power to lead with moral authority. People marvel repeatedly in the gospels over his exercise of moral authority.

We have people in positions of leadership today who exercise power but lack moral authority. They have power with zero authority. In his column this week, Michael Gerson wrote “When there is no authority, all that remains is a contest for power.”
Curiously enough, today’s Scripture addresses the issue of power and authority. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day have the power but lack moral authority. Jesus is one who demonstrates the use of legitimate power matched with moral authority.

Last Sunday, we left off at the end of Acts 2. The third chapter opens with a story about the healing of a lame man. Peter and John heal a lame beggar. The change in this man is instantaneous. Immediately, he jumps to his feet, “walking and leaping and praising God” (3:9).

A crowd gathers around these two miracle-workers. Peter rises to the occasion to testify that the power to perform works of healing does not originate with them. God, who raised Jesus from the dead, gives them the ability to carry forth Jesus’ mission. Peter closes his sermon, much as he did on Pentecost, by calling people to repent and turn to God (3:19).

This brings us to chapter 4, the portion David read for you. The elders, captain of the temple and Sadducees are in the crowd that day. There are two political interest groups back in Jesus’ day, the Pharisees and their conservative counterparts, the Sadducees. They take issue with Peter preaching about the resurrection. They deny the possibility of resurrection, since the Torah makes no mention of it (Acts 23:8; Luke 20:27). The Sadducees also happen to be in good relations with the Romans, affording them the luxury of
keeping their vast holdings as the wealthy aristocracy of Jerusalem.

It is late in the day, so they place Peter and John in a holding cell, hoping a night in the slammer will dampen their enthusiasm. Luke reports, almost as an aside, that the number of believers swells from 3000 to 5000. The movement is gaining momentum, creating heartburn among the religious elites.

The next morning, all the big guns of the temple assemble as the Sanhedrin, comparable in our day to the Supreme Court. There is Annas, the former high priest and Caiaphas, his son-in-law, the reigning high priest. Both of them figured prominently in Jesus’ mock trial (John 18:13ff).

They sit in a semi-circle, placing Peter and John in the middle. “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (4:9). Notice, they disregard Jesus’ resurrection and pay no attention to the healed man in attendance. Now, the issue is power. By what power did you do this?

Peter, acting as his own attorney begins on a note of irony. He wants to know how healing a lame man constitutes a crime. Next, he addresses their question of power. “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed” (4:10).

Peter cites Psalm 110 about the stone the builders rejected that has become the cornerstone (4:11). Jesus has become the capstone in God’s plan of salvation. Peter asserts that
salvation is found in no one else (4:13). Jesus acts as God’s sole agent of salvation. His listeners agree that the God of Israel is the only Savior. The attempt to transfer this exalted status to Jesus sets their teeth on edge.

In verse 13, two things about this exchange stand out to our narrator Luke. First, the courage of Peter and John in the face of opposition. Second, Peter and John, in the estimation of the Sanhedrin are unschooled, ignorant men. The Greek word for ignorant, *idiotes*, is where we derive our English word idiot. These two apostles are common fishermen who have no formal rabbinic training. Their only claim to fame is “they have been with Jesus” (4:13). Again, more irony. They received their training from Jesus, the master teacher.

Yet, these two uneducated men have backed this seventy-member Sanhedrin into a corner. If they punish Peter and John for healing a lame man, they will lose credibility among the people. Yet, if they say and do nothing, they will concede power to this burgeoning movement. So they resort to damage control. They order these two apostles to cease and desist speaking about Jesus. Peter and John say, in effect, you can’t be serious. “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (4:20).

Go back to the question these power-brokers ask Peter and John: “By what power did you do this?” You see, it all comes down to power. Never mind about Jesus’ resurrection or the healing of this lame man. It’s all about power. Where have we heard this scenario before?

Peter answers their question of power by appealing to the name of Jesus. “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,
whom you crucified, but whom *God raised from the dead* that this man stands before you healed” (4:10). The phrase, “whom God raised from the dead,” is central to every sermon Peter delivers. Earlier in chapter 3, in Peter’s speech to justify healing of this lame man, he announces, “You killed the author of life but *God raised Jesus from the dead*” (3:15). In Peter’s inaugural sermon on the day of Pentecost, he declares, “*God raised Jesus to life*” (2:24). Three times in successive sermons, Peter declares that God raised Jesus from the dead. If you carry this thought forward, the implications are enormous. Jesus is not dead. He is alive!

In Romans, Paul writes, “If the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, he who raised Christ from death will also give life to your mortal bodies by the presence of his Spirit in you. Romans 8:11. The Spirit of God who raised Jesus gives us life also.

In the 1920s, a Presbyterian minister, Alfred Ackley, preached about Christ in a series of evangelistic messages. One young Jewish student who attended the services kept asking, “Why should I worship a dead Jew?” Ackley responded by saying, “He lives. He is not dead, but lives here and now. I can prove it by my own experience, as well as the testimony of countless believers.”

Ackley was a prodigious hymn-writer in addition to being a preacher. He wrote 1500 hymns over the course of his life. After this encounter with this young Jewish student, he wrote in 1933 a gospel hymn titled *I Serve a Risen Savior* or *He Lives*. Chris and I used to sing this hymn every Wednesday night for years at a prayer and praise service in the
church where we served in college ministry. The refrain of the song is embedded in my memory, “He lives. He lives, Christ Jesus lives today. He walks with me and talks with me along life’s narrow way. He lives, he lives, salvation to impart. You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart.”

I remember as a child people would tell me that Jesus lives in my heart. Before I was able to think in abstract terms, the notion of Jesus living in my heart confused me.

Did God shrink-wrap Jesus to fit inside my heart? Does Jesus live in my right ventricle or left ventricle? If Jesus lives in my heart, why do I still get acid reflux? Okay, I know, it’s a metaphor. Jesus lives inside of us by means of his Spirit.

For much of my early life, I believed in Jesus much as I believed in George Washington. I gave mental assent to Jesus as a figure of history yet it did not make any appreciable difference in my life. I went on, pretty much as I did before, until I realized Jesus actually wants to live inside of me. He wants to give me life—abundant life, lasting hope, deep serenity.

We are inviting you to become All-In with Jesus this fall. The language of All-In intimidates some people. Last Monday night, a small group of men approached me after I challenged them to be All-In. They asked if it was acceptable for them to become More-In. They didn’t know if they could
pull it off to be All-In. Their comment was tongue-in-cheek, but I get what they were saying. All-In sounds unattainable. Let me return to something I said two Sundays ago. We are asking you to give as much as you know about yourself to as much as you know about Jesus. We want everyone to take the next step in following Jesus. Some of you are ready to take the first step of opening your life to Jesus. Others of you are about to give Jesus greater access into your life.

Maybe you need courage today—courage to say something, courage to witness for Christ. In our current culture, we have lost our ability to say anything about Christ. The thought-police in common culture have convinced us to keep our religious thoughts to ourselves. You might recall that Peter, the chief spokesperson of our faith, was once a timid disciple.

Maybe you need strength to defeat a persistent sin or bad habit in your life. What areas of your life do you need to bring under the Lordship of Christ? An addiction of some kind? Controlling your anger? A spirit of resentment and bitterness? A lack of forgiveness? It is not simply a matter of trying harder. Let the Spirit fill you with Jesus’ life, his presence and power.