

Just Power & Community
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – Sept. 19, 2021

Scripture: Mark 10:35-45; Luke 8:44-48

Hymns: VT 778 – Will You Let Me Be Your Servant; VT 797 – We Are People of God's Peace

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶ And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷ And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” ³⁹ They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Luke 8:44-48

⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵ Then Jesus asked, “Who touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.” ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.” ⁴⁷ When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”

If I were to ask you what the Christian faith has to say about power, what would your answer be? I would guess some version of “give it up,” right? I once got into a theological discussion with a friend over this.¹ It was specifically around the definition of the word *Gelassenheit* – has anyone heard that word before? So *Gelassenheit* is a German word from early Anabaptism in the 1500s, which can be translated as

¹ For more about *Gelassenheit*, see <https://canadianmennonite.org/blogs/susie-guenther-loewen/gelassenheit-and-power>

something like “yieldedness to God’s will.” So my friend was saying that Gelassenheit means self-denial, giving up all power and control. This is like in the poem or hymn in Philippians 2, where Jesus is said to have “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” Some of the Anabaptist-Mennonite emphasis on humility comes from passages like this. We are called to be humble, not to seek out power over others. The early Anabaptists set up their new churches with this in mind: that if all are humble, then there is equality. We are a priesthood of ALL believers.

But, I actually disagreed with my friend. You see, I don’t think Gelassenheit is about denying ourselves or becoming powerless. That’s not what God wants for us. It’s not a zero-sum game of God having all the power and us none. (That’s authoritarianism.) Rather God seeks to be in relationship with us to fulfill our truest selves, to empower us to do God’s work in the world, to enable us to follow the example of Jesus as disciples. See the difference? We are not to love God instead of ourselves, but to love God as we love ourselves, to love ourselves as made in the image of God. So Gelassenheit doesn’t ask us to do away with power, but redefines it as empowerment, as just power.

Today is the first Sunday of a new worship series we are starting for Fall, which is all about Just Living and the Pandemic Church. As we explore different dimensions of justice in the Bible, we will also look at some of what this past year and a half of being the church in a global pandemic has brought to the surface, what has been distilled for us as most important about being the church. This morning, we will look at what it means to be a community of just power.

Our biblical passages for today are all about a different way of understanding power. And the first, from Mark, is all about how the disciples completely misunderstood Jesus' teachings about power, so we're in pretty good company here! Two of Jesus' disciples who are brothers, James and John, figure that something radical is about to happen in the Jesus movement, and they're sort of right. This chapter happens to be followed by the story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (the Palm Sunday story). So they figure they'd better put in a good word for themselves for when Jesus is in charge as king. They ask him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:37). In other words, they want to be Jesus' right- and left-hand advisors when Jesus takes the throne. Jesus simply replies, "You do not know what you are asking." Jesus is about to be crucified, and those on his right and left hands will be condemned criminals.

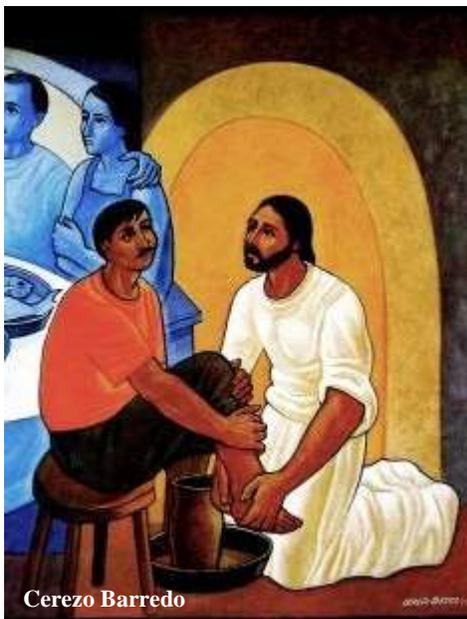
Then the other ten disciples hear about what James and John have done, and

they get upset with them. So Jesus has a lesson for

them about power. He says,

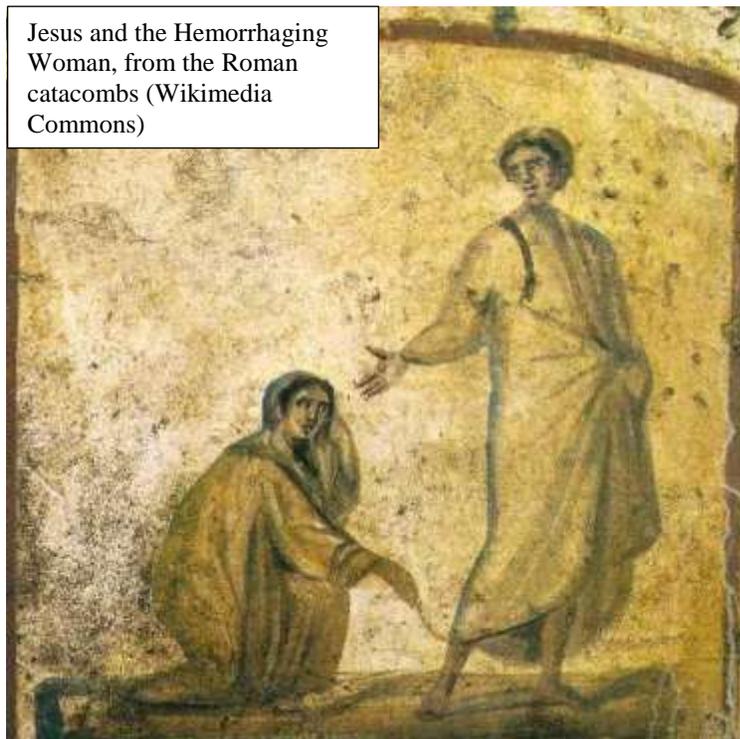
You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (v. 42-45).

Here we have the roots of the idea of servant-leadership that we often talk about. Others may define power as tyranny, as lording it over other



people. “But it is not so among you,” says Jesus. You must see power differently – as serving others. Greatness is not the emperor or king on his gilded throne, but the Messiah washing the dirt from his disciples’ feet. “The first shall be last,” as Jesus says elsewhere (Matt. 20:16).

But our second passage for today adds a whole other dimension to the transformed understanding of power that Jesus is encouraging in his disciples. It’s the well-known story of the woman with the hemorrhage who reaches out to Jesus for healing, found in Luke 8. Now I love this story because it almost makes us do cartwheels with how many of our assumptions it turns on their heads! Jesus does the unexpected multiple times in this story. First of all, this is a story within a story – Jesus is on his way to heal the daughter of Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, a man of



Jesus and the Hemorrhaging Woman, from the Roman catacombs (Wikimedia Commons)

very high status, a powerful man. On his way to this very important person’s house, while Jesus is passing to the crowd, this healing happens – a healing of a woman who is, in that context, powerless, essentially a “nobody.” And it happens almost by accident. The woman approaches Jesus and touches the back fringe of his clothes, and immediately

experiences healing! Now we are told that this woman had been experiencing bleeding

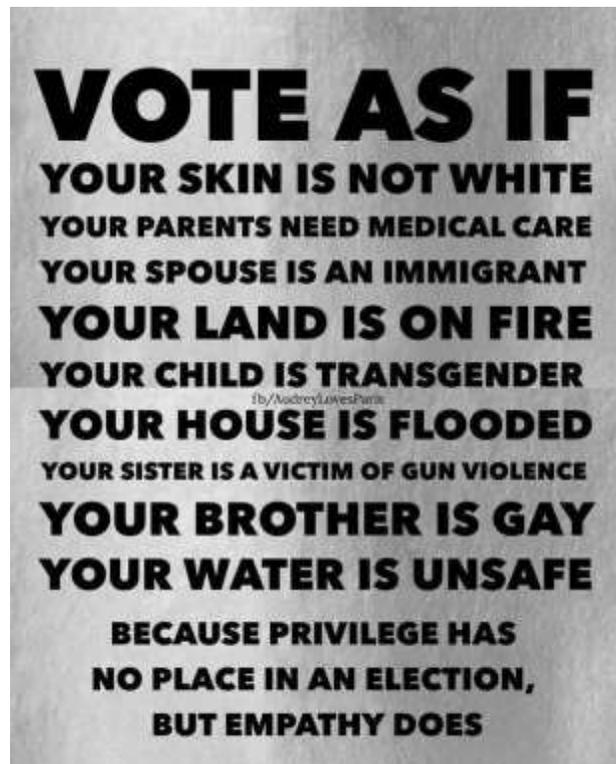
or a hemorrhage for twelve years, and that she had spent all her money on doctors who could not cure her. Destitute, excluded, and shamed as unclean under the Law for twelve long years, this woman does not even dare approach Jesus directly for healing. Instead, she touches the back hem of Jesus' clothes in the hope that he can heal her disease. And Jesus realizes right away what has happened. "Who touched me?" he asks, and Peter and the other disciples give each other the side-eye: what a ridiculous question! Peter pipes up, "What do you mean, Jesus? We're walking through a crowd!" He's impatient – they have to get to the important synagogue leader's house! But Jesus stops, and he says, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me" (v. 46). The woman is frightened – Luke says she is "trembling" – and she confesses. She's expecting Jesus to publicly shame her for her audacity, for daring to take healing power from him in this way. But Jesus does no such thing; in fact, he does the opposite! He empowers her, saying it wasn't even his power that healed her but her own faith! "Your faith has made you well," he says to her. "Go in peace." And he calls her "daughter," calling her back into the community from which she had been excluded and marginalized for twelve years.

Reading these two accounts of Jesus' teachings on power back to back tells us something very interesting about Jesus' approach to it. It tells us that Jesus doesn't have a one-size-fits-all approach to power. Jesus' message for his disciples – the insiders, the leaders-in-training of the Jesus movement – is to serve others, to lead with humility, not tyranny or lording it over others. But to the marginalized, hemorrhaging woman, his message is that she is "somebody," a beloved daughter of God, affirmed as a person of faith and courage. His message is not for her to be humble (which would

change nothing for her), but to build her up and empower her in front of his disciples and the watching crowd. This is Jesus sharing his power with someone who was formerly powerless. After all, Jesus didn't only teach that the first shall be last, but also that the last shall be first (Matt. 20:16).

And this is what is meant by "just power." It's not power-over – the dominating kind of power which is the root of all forms of violence. It's not powerlessness, which undervalues one's God-given gifts, internalizing a sense of worthlessness. Rather, it's power-with or shared power – the power of compassion and solidarity, the power of mutuality and cooperation, the power of building each other up, and building peace. It is this mutual empowerment of power-with that the church is called to embody.

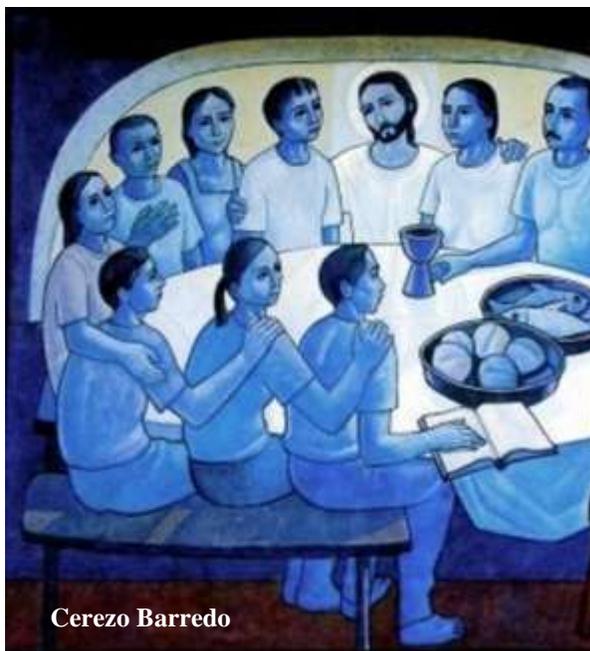
So what does power-with look like in our everyday lives? With an election coming up tomorrow, it means using our privilege of voting for the common good, not just for



our own benefit. A pastor friend of mine shared this image on social media this week (see left). Maybe some of these are true for us as well! Voting is one way we can share power in our wider community, supporting government leaders that look out for the most vulnerable among us.

As we continue to adapt the worship and life of our church community to this pandemic, it also means an awareness of equity and accessibility

issues within our own community. Do we make assumptions about who “belongs” more or less than others in our faith community?² Our families, our workplaces, our friendships and everyday interactions: all of these are opportunities to practice power-with or just power. Maybe you can think of a recent circumstance or interaction where you had a chance to share power with someone else, and maybe you rose to the occasion, or maybe you missed it. Or maybe you can think of a time when someone empowered you just when you needed it, and how that felt.



These days, when we may be feeling discouraged at facing the fourth wave of this pandemic, power-with can take the form of encouraging one another to carry on, especially those carrying the heaviest burdens (I’m thinking of healthcare workers, teachers, and others on the “front lines,” those who are lonely or struggling with mental or physical health, those caring for elders or young children). Let’s do the next right thing, one step at a time, and bless each other with courage for this long, long journey. Like a grove of trees connected by underground roots, let’s strengthen each other, knowing that we belong to one another even when we cannot gather and see one another; those unseen connections remain between us. And let’s remind one another that, as always, Jesus goes with us, empowering us to continue to love God, our neighbours, and ourselves. AMEN

² For a really interesting discussion about access and equity in pandemic plans, see: <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-priya-parker-on-how-we-return-and-why-it-matters-part-1-of-2/>