

“Lesson Three: Challenging ‘the Powers that Be’ with the Power of God”

Lent II

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 17, 2019, Lent II, dedicated to the eight new members and their six children joining First Church today, to 50 Muslim men, women and children murdered while they prayed on Friday in Christchurch, New Zealand, to Rylan Antonio Ahrens on his second birthday March 19th and to memory of Ruth Ahrens Klingler who entered eternal life on March 16th and always to the glory of God!

“Lesson Three: Challenging ‘the Powers that Be’ with the Power of God”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Power vs. Power. In today’s gospel lesson, the power of a tyrant faces the power of a prophet of God. Luke’s lesson number #3 is simply this: **the power of God trumps the**

power of the tyrant every time. Stake your claim with God's power and you will prevail. Tyrants don't win the "long games" against God.

In Luke 13:31-35, Luke tells a short story about an encounter with Pharisees who warn Jesus to "*walk away from here. Herod wants to kill you.*" Jesus responds, "*No, you walk away. And tell that 'Fox' to stay away from me.*" Jesus will not have the tyrant run roughshod over him the way he does over his people. Herod Antipas, the successor to the evil Herod of Jesus' Nativity story, is motivated by fear and insecurity and a deep hunger for power, control and security. He has beheaded John the Baptist. Now he is worked up about John's cousin - Jesus.

When a tyrant can't handle a prophet, that tyrant threatens the prophet with death. Tyrants through the ages bully and threaten people who question them – especially those who speak to their power from a loving and divine source.

As this Roman Puppet holds Galilee hostage, Herod wants to keep a boot on the throat of his people and anyone who has a different mission or vision of reality. He wants to impress Rome and oppress his people. But he is up against a prophet of God who calls people to repent, to remember, to be faithful to God and hold onto the ancient promises of God for love and justice.

Jesus brushes aside the warnings about Herod's evil scheming as only so many words (which they are, of course), futile efforts that are not significant in the big picture, the plan of God. God's word has power. Herod's words are useless. (Although these two will meet face-to-face in the final hours of Jesus' life).

Still, “the powers that be,” whether it's Herod in Galilee, Pilate in Jerusalem, the religious leaders there and scattered throughout the land, the wealthy and prestigious, or the mighty Roman Empire itself, can cause havoc in the meantime.

These are all powers of one kind of another, some of them admittedly dependent on those more powerful than themselves, all of whom dislike Jesus' talk about “the first being last, and the last being first.”

In fact, that's exactly what Jesus was talking about right before this scene opens. He wanted to clarify to his followers and listeners that, although they appeared to be powerless and “last,” God sees them as “first.” This does not sound like good news to those who thought they were comfortably (if tenuously) ensconced in the places of prestige and power. But it is “great news” for the ones who everyone writes off as “the last.”

Let's remember - Jesus of Nazareth did not invent prophecy. He will be the first to tell you that. He was the not

the first to prophesy deliverance and he certainly was not the last. This is not the first time a prophet has stood up to “the powers that be” in Israel or anywhere in the world. The language and imagery in this short text recall not only the ancient promises of God's tender care, but also God's holding Israel to a high standard of faithfulness to a covenant carved on their hearts. When Jesus speaks (and heals and drives out demons and feeds the masses), he is doing what God has done throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and through the ages. He is deeply rooted in word and deed.

As Jesus turns his eyes and feet from Herod's weak threats in Galilee, he sets his eyes and feet toward “the city of God” – Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem is the heart of all things religious, political and economic. It's the “power center” of his world.

With his heart turned to Jerusalem, Jesus laments and weeps over the city. In his words, we hear the voices of Isaiah (60:4) and Zechariah (10: 6-10) who have wept before him as they proclaim across time that God will gather and protect the scattered children of Jerusalem. God will save them out of God's great love for God's chosen city and God's chosen people. Israel finding shelter under God's ‘wings’ occur frequently in Deuteronomy, Ruth and the Psalms (see Deut. 32:11; Ruth 2:12; Psalms 57:1; 61:4; 91:4). His lament for

Jerusalem is painfully familiar to the ears of those who can hear them.

As we learn lessons from Luke this Lent, here is one not to be lost on us. Luke mentions Jerusalem 99 times in his writings. The rest of the New Testament writers only speak of Jerusalem 49 times altogether. So, two books – 99 times and the other 25 books, 49 times. Luke is deeply concerned about the economic, religious and political power center and Jesus' place over against the powers.

We come to realize that Jesus loves the city and its leaders who wish to do him harm. The city is a place that refuses what makes for peace or “shalom.” But rather than run away from this “power source,” Jesus goes right into the city and *“warns against the oppressive acquisitiveness of urban style (which we call 'coveting') that in turn produces endless anxiety”* (Walter Brueggemann).

Aren't “coveting” and “anxiety” marks of our life today? Don't we get wrapped-up in the stuff of our times and our powerful place in it and forget to pay close attention to people of God who actually make up the metropolis in which we live? Buildings, power, and control begin to hold sway over “neighbors” and loving them as God would have us love them.

In “neighbors,” God creates a power source different than the powerful of this world are used to. The word “neighborliness” has a power of its own. If we remember and then live into the second great commandment about loving our neighbor as ourselves, we will embrace this power of caring for the ones right next to us. The true power of God is at work in the neighborliness of God’s people.

In today's political climate, we hear so much talk about God and God's will--regardless of the separation of church and state we also claim to revere so highly. It seems to me that our vision of “neighborliness” is a much more beautiful, powerful and compelling vision for both our internal and external affairs than proclamations about “God’s will.”

To be a good neighbor fulfills both religious aspirations and secular ones. We find common ground for all of us to stand on, whether we are “religious” or not. It's a vision we can all embrace. It is something we can all reach for. To be a good neighbor inspires us to share, to be just, to include rather than exclude, to heal and repair and strengthen, to protect the vulnerable, to care about one another and show respect for every person.

Such neighborliness is a powerful driver against the tyranny of divisiveness and hate in our times.

At a luncheon Friday called the First Social Justice Awards, one individual after another and one organization after another were recognized for their powerful social justice actions in our city. The BREAD Organization was honored for our work for the community. As well, the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park received the top organizational award for our work to lift up, celebrate and honor social justice in Columbus and our nation. In essence, all these men, women and children were celebrated for being great neighbors. What a humble honor to be counted among so many for the great work of leveling the playing field for all and embracing our sisters and brothers for justice action. More than honor, however, receiving such an award puts the spotlight on this community to be truly good neighbors and change systems of power that keep people from the fullness of life.

I am inspired by people who find a “**niche of neighborliness**” and then make a difference there. One of my “Neighbor Heroes” was my Aunt Ruth Klingler who died yesterday. Aunt Ruth wrote tens of thousands of notes of love and encouragement to people across the decades. She would send prayers, poetry, and words of encouragement to people facing their hard times, their most difficult losses. Well over 100 notes a week went out to those in need. She was truly one of the kindest people I ever knew. She was the size of a Hobbit

with the heart of a lion and the kindness of a gentle lamb. Her power was in her clear, purposeful way of touching lives through the power of her pen and her poetry. She lived the power of love against the power of pain and distress.

We saw the power of love and neighborliness lived out in Christchurch, New Zealand on Friday when, in the face of devastation and mass murder, 48-year-old, Abdul Aziz engaged the gunman playing “Cat and mouse” with him through the parking lot of the second mosque. While 43 people were murdered in the first mosque, only seven died in the second. Many are claiming Aziz’s tactics against the shooter worked and ultimately drove him away.

While his four terrified children screamed at him to take cover, Aziz picked up an ATM machine and hurled it at the shooter and then when the shooter went back to his car to get another weapon, Aziz hurled one of the empty guns like a javelin at the windshield of the shooters’ car. It blew his windshield apart and clearly shook up the shooter as he drove away cursing at Aziz. When asked about his heroic acts, Abdul Aziz said, *“I have got to be honest. It wasn’t me. It was God who saved everybody.”*

We cannot all be great prophets of God, challenging the powers that be nose to nose; toe to toe – although more of us

can and should do this. But, we can all be great neighbors, meeting our neighbors in their hardest days, in the face of their most crushing pain, and offer them notes, hugs, meals and even laying down our lives, acknowledging that God, not us, is the great presence in confronting destructive power and evil itself. We can also organize and change the crushing realities of their lives by challenging the power of injustice with the power of justice.

This week, Jews across the world will gather to celebrate Purim. Purim is the festival in which Queen Esther is remembered for saving the exiled Jewish diaspora in Persia from being wiped out so many centuries ago. When cowering, frightened and unsure that she can save her people from utter destruction, Queen Esther receives this timely message from her Uncle Mordecai:

“Don’t think that just because you live in the king’s house, you’re the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, God will send help and deliverance for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this.”

Queen Esther embraces the words, “**Maybe you were placed here for such a time as this.**” She finds her courage, finds her voice, and saves her people – all of them.

How about you and me? Maybe you and I were placed here by God for such a time as this.

Let’s find our courage find our voices and confront power with power. When the power of God and God’s people face “the powers that be,” Luke’s Lenten Lesson number #3 is simply this: “***challenge the powers that be with the power of God.***” Find your voice, your place and your power as a neighbor, a friend, and join with others here and elsewhere to make a difference in this world. After all, it is the only we have been given to care for. Let’s do our best for such a time as this. Amen.

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