

(5th Sunday in Lent)

Rev. Scott Marrese-Wheeler
March 18, 2018

John 19:1-16
"We have no king but Caesar!"

Sam came home from school the other day and excitedly told us he got to use "power" tools in class. We are not exactly a "power tool" family. Or are we?

Staci and I make part of our living writing. English novelist and playwright, Edward Bulwer-Lytton said: "The pen is mightier than the sword". Isn't a pen a "power tool"?

Which begs the question, "Who is more powerful?" The one who wields the sword, carry's a gun, commands a military or the One who brings the Word to life, gives it flesh and meaning?

Power must be appealing to us, because we use the word to describe many things: Power Play, Power Wash, Power Ball, Power Tools, Powerful Moment, Powerful Experience?

Some say, "**Money is Power**".

The 1990s German musical group - **Snap** - sang, "**I've Got the Power**" on their global, chart-topping album - "**World Power**".

Plato is quoted as saying: "**The measure of a man is what he does with power.**"

Merriam-Webster defines the word "Power" as: the "**ability to act or produce an effect; possession of control, authority, or influence over others; physical might, political control or influence**".

Throughout human history, individuals and nations have sought the power to dominate and rule the known world. The Philistines with their giant, Goliath, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire, the Assyrian Empire are a few. Alexander the Great sought to "Hellenize" the world. The Roman Empire showed them who really had the power. Napoleon did until he met his "Waterloo". The Turks of the Ottoman Empire gave it a whirl. The British Empire said, "The sun will never set on our empire!" And then there was Hitler and his Nazi party.

In our post-World War II era, we began to speak of the world's two big "Super Powers" - The Soviet Union and America. Though China would argue the point. North Korea might too!

The President of the United States is sometimes referred to as the "most powerful person in the world". As "Commander and Chief" of what some consider the "most powerful" military in the world, and as one who has power to launch enough "firepower" with the simple push of a nuclear button, it does seem that the person who sits in the Oval Office has a lot of power.

Who really has the power? The one who seeks to dominate others, inflicting suffering in order to control the people or the one who chooses to suffer with and for the people as a matter of justice and love?

In 1776, tired of a king and his powerful empire who they felt was oppressing them, 56 men, drafted and signed a "Declaration of Independence". Addressing the sufferings inflicted on them, they wrote: "**When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one**

people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

In that spirit, this past Wednesday students around the country and right here in Cambridge walked out of their schools. Students are tired of those who have the political "power" to deal with our national obsession with guns and gun violence and can only offer their "Thoughts and Prayers."

In peaceful, non-violent, and respectful protests, young people held vigils, moments of silence, and public gatherings in the halls of power, demanding changes to our nation's obsession around guns.

As a side note, many clergy, including Cambridge area pastors and myself, supported the students with our presence and participation in their walkouts, vigils and protests. Our church rang its bell 17 times in support of the students.

In response, school administrators dealt with this exercise in the students First Amendment Rights in various ways. Some, like our Cambridge Administrators, were supportive.

Others, like in McFarland, took a more cautious approach, discouraging the students and distancing themselves, but not stopping them.

Others took a more harsh approach, disciplining any student who took part with suspension and detentions.

In McFarland, the three young women who organized a very meaningful vigil, of which Sam and I took part, and was well attended by parents and community members, and was held at the American Legion, were hauled into the Associate Principal's office following the event. They were disciplined because they remained a few minutes longer to help put away the sound system used and to talk with the media.

In rural Arkansas, three high school students, who walked out and sat down on a bench outside of the school entrance to observe the 17 minutes of silence in remembrance of the victims shot and killed in Florida, were given two options for their punishment, a two-day suspension or corporal punishment (spanking, which is still allowed in 19 states).

The three students chose corporal punishment. As one person noted: Those in positions of power used **"violence as a means of punishing students who were using non-violent means to protest violence."**

In these situations, where does the power lie? With the school administrators who use their positions of power to discipline or the students who accept the discipline freely?

I know, some of you are sitting here wondering what does this have to do with Jesus?

Some of you might even been thinking - "Those kids deserved a spanking!"

Then again, a crowd of people felt Jesus deserved crucifixion.

Seriously, Scott, how can you equate the two? A fair question.

So let's reflect for a moment on who has the power as Jesus stands before Pilate. As a representative of Caesar, Pilate has the power to preserve Jesus' life or order his death.

Bound, mocked, and beaten by armed guards, then adorned with a purple robe and crown of thorns, Jesus stands before Pilate and the crowd who call for his execution. Crucify him, the people shout!

But Pilate, still sees no real reason to do so, until they question his loyalty to the powerful Caesar saying, **"If you release him, you are no friend of the Emperor!"**

"Shall I crucify your king?" "We have no king, but Caesar!" the crowd responds. And with that, Jesus fate is sealed. The ones who believe they have the power to save his life or take it, have spoken.

Again, who really has the power? The one who seeks to dominate others, inflicting suffering in order to control the people or the one who chooses to suffer with and for the people as a matter of justice and love?

You have no power over me, Jesus has reminded Pilate, who sits him on the judgement seat for all the people to see. Give him a detention! No, Spank him! No, better yet, crucify him! He deserves it! That will teach him and all who follow him a good lesson!

In the face of violence, Jesus chose to suffer in love with and for the people. For his non-violent, faith-filled, God blessed response in the face of violence, the people demanded a violent act - crucifixion!

Pilate reminds Jesus he has the power to live or die. Jesus says your power is **"irrelevant!"** (Meda Stemper - WorkingPreacher.com)

The crowd asks Pilate who has the power over him - **"Caesar or this powerless prisoner?"** (Meda Stemper)

In this situation, Meda Stemper says: **"If his ultimate goal is power, it cannot also be justice and love, so Pilate will execute an innocent man..."**

Like Pilate, the people must also chose where they believe the ultimate goal of power in life lies. For whatever reason - fear, hatred, anger, or just being caught up in the "mob mentality," they choose Caesar.

Meda Stemper notes: **"Servants of Caesar are known by their violence. Jesus says everyone will know his servants by their love."** (WorkingPreacher.com)

Where do we believe power lies? In the power of the sword or in the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth and love?

Like the students this past Wednesday, we will stage a walkout this morning. We will walkout of this sanctuary, we will walkout of this church, and we will walkout into the world.

God knows, like the students, we may not fully understand the whole reason we are walking out. Like the students, I hope we continue to reflect and engage one another around the reason we are doing so, because as the students know, our lives depend on it.

In walking out of here, we will have a choice to make about where we believe true power lies in our world.

Meda Stemper asks: **“Do our words and deeds reflect our citizenship in the alternate kingdom of God, where followers of Jesus, are nonviolent, vulnerable lovers of friend and foe? Or do our words and actions suggest that our first allegiance is to some other power -- a nation or party or leader or symbol?”**

That is a tough question for us as Americans and followers of Jesus to answer.

As you think about how you might answer her question, I offer you these words of one person who had to previously answer that question we he led his people on non-violent, walkout. Gandhi said: **“The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace.”**

Until then, we are called to walkout joining the non-violent acts of love, facing the darkness together, and reflecting the light and love of God in all we say and do. Amen.