

*Rev. Jennifer A. Gleichauf
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Stewarding Our Power
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I've been listening to a podcast this past week called The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill which is about a huge mega church called Mars Hill in Seattle in the late nineties and early 2000's. The description of it reads: "Founded in 1996, Seattle's Mars Hill Church was poised to be an influential, undeniable force in evangelicalism—that is until its spiraling collapse in 2014. The church and its charismatic founder, Mark Driscoll, had a promising start. But the perils of power, conflict, and Christian celebrity eroded and eventually shipwrecked both the preacher and his multimillion dollar platform."

It's a fascinating bit of reporting about a mega church, it's pastor and the challenges that come when power is misused. One view of what happened is that the pastor, Mark Driscoll's popularity and influence grew so fast – meteoric, really – and in his greater and greater position of power he became abusive and narcissistic, demanding absolute loyalty and obedience and eventually hurting so many people that there were finally enough to band together and come forward.

But while the internet allowed Mars Hill Church to have a tremendous reach and therefore a very public fall, their story is by no means a standalone story through Christian history. There are many examples of pastors all throughout history who have abused power or for whom a fast rise to popularity and platform meant their influence grew faster than the depth of their character. And there are many stories of churches who have been more interested in following a charismatic personality than they have been in following Jesus, often along the way bestowing their pastor with a great deal of

power and prestige, only to find their church in shambles when the pastor inevitably falls off the pedestal they've been placed upon.

So, for those of us not involved, the story of Mars Hill Church is merely a fascinating case study in what can happen when one person has a power over others, but it is in no way a new story. This problem of power is familiar not only in churches, but in politics, businesses, entertainment - pretty much anywhere there are humans. I'm sure you could all cite plenty of examples of people who have had very public rises and falls and people who have come to public attention when their bad behavior catches up with them. The "me too" movement in the last decade alone has shown us plenty of examples of people misusing power over others.

But we know the misuse of power is hardly new. And we only have to turn to our scripture today to see it 2000 years ago. The disciples still think Jesus is going to step into the position of ruler as they know it. They believe Jesus is the Messiah and they believed that meant he would be king. And I'm sure they thought he would be a good king, but it is not hard to imagine that even more important to them was the idea of conquering the people who had violently oppressed them and their families. And perhaps even more than that, as we see when they ask Jesus to sit on his right and left, the disciples clearly imagine themselves reaping the benefits of being the ones closest to Jesus. When they envision sitting on his right and left and helping to rule they are imagining themselves in a position of privilege and power.

And Jesus keeps telling them that this is not the plan. Jesus is not going to participate in the system of power that exists. Jesus tells them, yet again, he has not come to rule. He has not come to be served. He is not interested in any system that is structured to have one person, or even a group of people, having power OVER others.

But it might be a fair question to stop and ask why? Why won't Jesus just become King? Surely we believe he could have if he wanted to. And if Jesus would just become King, couldn't he make a difference? If Jesus became King, he could teach and perform miracles and treat people well and fairly. He could transform the way the economy worked so that there were no more poor or hungry. He could free slaves and make sure everyone knew more about God's love. Maybe in the greatest of all miracles, he could inspire everyone else to stop using their power negatively. It would take a lot of miracles, but it would be amazing. A utopia. A paradise.

But then he would die. Even if he lived to a ripe old age, Jesus was human and so eventually he would die. And then what? Would humanity be so changed by Jesus' reign as King that we would still be living that way these 2000 years later? Would the kingdom Jesus' created be able to continue on as a paradise without him? Could Jesus' reigning as King, even as a perfect King, put an end to humanity's unhealthy relationship to power forever?

Perhaps you'll call me a pessimist, but I don't think so. At least not if we were still left with our free will. Even Jesus' disciples, the ones who knew him best, who walked this earth with him, were already angling for positions of more power for themselves, before they've even reached Jerusalem, based only on the hope of triumph.

And so, the legacy of Jesus, the reason we call ourselves Christians today, 2000 years later, is because Jesus didn't come to teach us how to wield power, even to wield it for good. What Jesus is trying to show the disciples, and us, is that the only way to stop the cycle of power abuse is to entirely reframe the way we look at power and instead of

choosing power over, choosing to serve instead. In a nugget, Jesus always chose the power of love over the love of power.

Jesus tells them, “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.”

Followers of Jesus are called to be a people of service, not power. The only power we work for is the empowering of the Holy Spirit. But this is easier said than done, because while it is easy to find examples of politicians or CEO’s or mega church pastors who have used their power poorly or wrongly, if we take a break from finger pointing and take the time to look at our own lives, we will likely find ourselves not all that far from the disciples.

Jesus invites us all to consider, how do we use the power we have? Because even if we do not have the power to change the course of history, we would be wrong to assume we have no power at all. Some of us have power in our workplaces, while others have power in our homes, our neighborhoods, our communities, the places we volunteer. We have power in our relationships and in basic daily interactions with others because sometimes power is simply how we treat one another and whether we choose to manipulate, bully or pressure others to do what we want or how we use them to feel better about ourselves. We have power in how we choose to share our money and resources and education with others. We have power as members of a democracy who have a voice and a vote. In so many of the choices we make each day, we are choosing whether to be of service to others or to use our power over them - or to choose the power of love over the love of power.

The disciples wanted to ride Jesus' coattails into a place of glory and privilege - they could already taste the power. But Jesus says to follow him means to give up that taste and walk further and further on a path of humbleness, humility, grace and servanthood.

This is not an easy path. It requires contending with our own egos, our own desire for power and privilege, and as such, is a life long challenge. Jesus isn't asking us to degrade ourselves or saying having our own desires is inherently bad. But he invites us to imagine a different world where relationships and systems of power over are traded in for relationships and systems where serving one another, loving one another, is the priority.

So, if we want to try to follow Jesus and become good stewards of our power, we start by examining our relationship to power. We ask questions like: "who am I currently serving with my life? Who would God like me to serve? What am I doing out of selfish motives, where do I have a taste for power, where is my ego running amok and how do I use the power I have over others instead of for or with others? What power do I have and how am I stewarding it?" Sometimes we know the answer to these questions already and just need a little space to acknowledge them. Sometimes we need God or others to show us the answers.

And the other way we follow is to practice serving others in intentional, obvious ways. Jesus suggested things like: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick or imprisoned, welcoming the stranger. It's a cliché to talk about how people who serve others often come away feeling as though they gained more than they gave, but being a cliché doesn't make it any less true. When we make time to serve in concrete, obvious ways, it almost always helps us to better examine how we serve in other ways – in our relationships, with our money and resources.

So, during this week, this stewardship season, take some time to consider how you are stewarding your power. Ask yourselves the important questions about how you are choosing to serve and where you may be using power in unhealthy ways, including pretending you don't have any. And may we keep trying to follow Jesus, who chose to step out of the cycle of abusive power even when it cost him everything, who always chose to serve rather than be served and who asked us to choose the power of love over the love of power. Amen.