

Kent United Church of Christ
 Sermon by the Rev. Jason Bricker-Thompson, director of youth ministries
 18 October 2009

Julius Caesar and the Choir Director
Mark 10:35-45

This morning Jesus makes a point to warn us not to be tyrants like the pagan political leaders of his day that lorded power over their people. To be sure, Julius Caesar and the Roman Empire, in all of its glory, certainly held tremendous power, but as the story of James and John shows us this morning, there are many types of power. As I have grown older I have come to see the Church as a significant source of both positive and occasionally hurtful power.

Like James and John, power sometimes goes to our heads. We often find ourselves dictating rather than serving, judging rather accepting. Recognizing this potential for power, Jesus this morning calls us to be a servant people, a servant people (*can you say that with me?*). He chastises the disciples not to jockey for power, not to fight over who will sit at the right and left hand of God, but to be servants to all. It is easy to see the tyranny of corrupt political leaders, but what about those of us, myself included, who hold power in our community of faith? I mean this in the nicest way possible, but what about the Church Choir Director, the Sunday School Teacher, the youth minister, the Deacons, the minister and other lay leaders? What powers do we hold, and how do we respond to this call by Jesus to be servants?

As I thought about this morning's gospel reading, I realized that my life, and probably many of yours, is marked by these moments when we have experienced the contradiction of what we might call the servant church, and in moments of frustration or pain, the tyrant Church.

I am conflicted by a gospel that so strongly calls us to be servants, and the reality that power sometimes leads us to lean toward being tyrants of sorts. We certainly would not classify ourselves in the same category of power and tyranny as corrupt politicians and fascist military dictators, but the leaders of the Church, of this Church and every church, certainly have tremendous power.

Some years ago, I had an Islamic friend and roommate in College and one late evening, as I was laying in bed, listening to Christian music, meditating and praying, my roommate came in, and thinking I was asleep turned off my music, and as was his custom he began saying his evening prayers in Arabic before going to sleep himself. I began silently to pray and complain to my God that my prayers to God been disrupted by my friend so he could pray to his God; and then in the midst of my complaining to God, God seemed to speak to me, and I realized, for the first time, that I and my friend were praying to the same God. God was bigger than my understanding of God. I then also felt a sense of sadness and shame that I had suddenly become so angry and judgmental of my friend who was simply also trying to worship. How could I judge his prayers as less important than my own merely because his name for God was in Arabic instead of English, because his religion was different than mine?

Through College and later Divinity School I continued to be conflicted by this idea of the tyrant Church and the servant Church. Through my process of ordination, I wondered at times if those in power would deem me "appropriate" to be ordained as a Christian Minister in the Disciples of Christ Church, not based on my competency as a theologian or pastoral care giver, but based on a whether my social and theological beliefs were similar enough to theirs. At the same time, I also had a friend who was seeking ordination who was gay, and she did not share her sexuality with the ordination committee due to fear that she would not be accepted. I think we both felt like we had to hide parts of ourselves in order to be accepted by some leaders in our Church. In the same way, today, there are people in congregations and communities all over our country who are afraid to share their beliefs and their whole selves with their fellow Christians for fear of being judged.

Even today I am conflicted by the tyrant Church and the servant Church. I attended an adult Sunday school class (not here at Kent UCC) some years ago, with a number of church leaders. These were good

people who I saw as my mentors. They were liberal, and progressive, and very open. They were discussing the aspects of worship that drew them closest to the divine, and ironically, in a moment of open discussion, one admitted however that if the Church were ever to get rid of the organ, she would no longer attend worship. Another agreed, and then another said that if the minister continued to use the projector and screen in worship she would leave also. These Church leaders, without any negative intention, held great power over the worship life of this congregation and while I would certainly not call them tyrants by any means, their insistence on what was and was not acceptable in worship excluded others and created a hierarchy of power in that distracted the Church from its call of servant hood. It distracted the Church from its call of servant hood.

My final and most recent conflict with the tyrant and servant Church happened this past year. I received a phone call from a very quiet, wholesome young woman. She needed to share something with me that she couldn't say over the phone. She had a secret that had been weighing her down. Something in her life had been giving her panic attacks for several years and she was just now able to talk about it. The next day that young woman approached me, and without a word, handed me a note and walked away. A folded piece of notebook paper—I held my breath for a moment as I unfolded the note. I expected the worst. It simply read: PAUSE “I think I am a lesbian”.

It is my sense that this young woman's faith community had engrained into her the idea that God did not love the part of her that was gay. She was tormented for years, struggling with a part of herself that she thought God didn't love which could not be separated from the rest of who she was. The Church had held such power over her that it had taken away God from her.

I have talked with so many college students, gay and straight, who share similar stories with me. They have left the Church, they have lost faith in God, because the Church or the God they have experienced hates gays, or it is sexist, or it is concerned more about power and wealth than it is about serving the poor. Obviously they have not found the right Church, or met the right Christians.

Today I mention these stories as a way of lifting up the many issues that confront the contemporary Church in its struggle to be the servant church, the open church, the United Church of Christ. We have an exodus of young people leaving the mainline Church because, in my experience as a College Chaplain, they encounter too much of the powerful, tyrant church, and not enough of the humble, open, united, servant Church.

I came to Kent United Church of Christ, because I see in you, I see in this congregation, a servant Church. We are not perfect, I am far from perfect, but I think we have taken that first step of recognizing Christ's calling to be servants, to seek justice, to care for the poor, to include our young people in and outside of worship, and to welcome the outsider. I was so excited to be called to this congregation last year because we have the opportunity to draw in and nurture a generation of people who are looking for a servant Church, who have potentially been hurt by politics and power and prejudice but who just simply want to worship somewhere where they feel welcomed and affirmed, and this can and should be that place. There is certainly work to be done, as there is always work to be done, but we can and should be the servant Church that so many in our community are looking for. Thanks be to God, Amen.