

Over the last few months, the world stage has been dominated by news from the Middle East. We have seen everyday people using social media to band together in places like Egypt and demand changes in leadership. “Perhaps the most disturbing of these uprisings has been in Libya where an armed, but untrained, group of protesters has been attacked by the highly trained and equipped army of Muammar Gaddafi, Libyan dictator for 40 years.” The United States has joined forces with other countries to seek to thwart Gaddafi’s advances.

If we want to see an example of “how the power of dominance and control can turn evil and destructive, this is it.” But are any of us really surprised? When folks get a taste of power and control, they do not want to give it up. People will do anything to maintain power. And this desire to maintain control can lead to some pretty devastating consequences.

It’s not just in politics that this happens. Have you ever worked for a boss that was controlling? A boss that micromanages your every move. A boss that demands that you do things that you know are manipulative in some way. A boss that does things to just annoy you? A boss that is overly critical of you but then can never find anything positive to say? Do you know someone like that in school? Maybe a teacher or professor who gets on a power trip.

A friend of mine is going through a divorce. He talks about how it’s amazing to him that he is now in a winner take all contest with a person that he had at one time pledged his life too. They are dividing up assets with each side demanding to take home a fair share. The desire to dominate can really bring about the evil in people.

Unfortunately, we who are Christian have a history where a desire to dominate brought out the evil in us. Whether it was the Crusades that led to the slaughter of non-Christians who stood in our way in the 11th through 13th centuries. The selling of indulgences in the 15th century or attempts today to shout hateful language at non-Christians, the desire for dominance creates space for evil to flourish.

The contrast between dominance and submission was clear back in Jerusalem in the year 30. On one side of the city, there was a procession composed mostly of peasants, of farmers, of the meek, of peacemakers, of outcasts following a certain Jesus from Galilee riding a donkey. These people placed their cloaks on the road and waved their palm branches in the air.

On the other side of the city came the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a war horse with a cavalry of soldiers intimidating the people around them. Which would win out? Which would prove to be stronger?

It is so tempting to align ourselves with the powerful and the ones exercising dominance. It is so easy to yearn for what the rich and powerful possess. But there is just one problem. We are sitting in a Christian church seeking to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus was the one who devoted his life to caring for the poor and the outcast, the ones shunned, the ones that others thought of as less than others.

Jesus is the one who rides into town on a donkey to “show the emptiness, the poverty, the hidden vulnerability of all dictators by choosing a different way, a way of love and grace and peace that those who cling to power can never understand or stamp out. He rides not to humiliate his opponents, but to forgive them, and to invite even them into a different way of being.

He rides, knowing that many will fail to hear the message, that many will see his quest as a failure, that many will be so addicted to their power that they will be unable to decipher the creative, gracious alternative he offers. He rides, giving up everything, so that, for those who have ears to hear, an alternative pattern can begin to emerge in the midst of the noise of power and violence. He rides, inviting us to step out of the marching line of power-by-dominance and join the dance of true freedom.”

“Then, as now, the crowds ask who this is. Then as now the answer lies not in the frameworks of power and dominance, but in the mysterious, gentle influence of meekness and love – which, in the end, is what the powerful fear the most, because they cannot control it.”

Dictators and controlling people fear a lack of control. But following Jesus means the freedom to give up control. To realize that we do not have to be in control but to trust that even when it appears that evil has won, that evil does not win. That in the end, God is always victorious.

On this Palm Sunday, we join in with some pretty powerless people. The peasants along the road. But we join in to follow a Savior who proves he is more powerful than any evil in this world. We don't have to find comfort in power as the world defines power. We don't have to try to control situations. We don't have to dominate and control what others do and think. We can give witness to a different model than the agenda of our society.

But my question before each of us is this. How well are we communicating this to our community? Our community is hungry to hear that there is a different message out there than winning at all costs. Our community is hungry to hear stories of people who lay down their life for another. Our community is hungry to experience people who are willing to sacrifice so that others can succeed.

As I was working on this sermon, I was really struggling with it. Some sermons are harder than others. I was struggling with this sermon because this is a story I hear and have tried to preach over and over for the past 20 years. What new is there for us to hear about this story of Jesus coming into Jerusalem with people standing on the side of the road and waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna," a word which means "God Save Us."

But then it dawned on me. Maybe this story is not for us in these pews. Because we know this story. We know the story that Jesus came and showed the world a different way to live than the power and dominance that is the way of the world. So rather than being a story for us, maybe this is a story that is for the people who are not in these pews.

Maybe this is a story for the person working as a waitress at the restaurant who got stiffed because the person she gave service to forgot to leave a tip (that would be me) and wonders why bother because the world is not fair. Maybe this is a story for the young couple that I watched at Chick Fil-A yesterday with the three kids. It was clear as I sat and observed them that they did not agree with the parenting style of the other and their afternoon lunch together was miserable for themselves and their children. It was clear that this mother and father were trying to control the other rather than work together as a team.

Maybe this a story for the used car salesman who tried to sell a vehicle recently to a friend of mine and convinced them the car had only about 60,000 miles on it when it fact it had about 200,000 miles on it.

Too many churches today have become too inward thinking. We come into worship and get involved in church with a consumerist attitude. We come in order to receive something from someone else. But I challenge us today to hear this story and then ask yourself, who needs to experience this story that is not here today?

Who is God pulling you toward to teach and to model and to be an example of someone who shows humility rather than dominance? Who is God pulling you toward that is exhibiting a servant attitude but they have never thought to connect their actions with the ways of God in Christ? It is only through you that their story can be connected to the gospel story.

When you are in your work environment and you are around someone who is controlling or dominating or you are tempted to be that way yourself, remember the story of humility found on Palm Sunday. When you are in a school environment and your teacher is on a power trip, remember the ways of humility demonstrated on Palm Sunday.

When you are in a meeting and you want to dominate the conversation, remember the humility shown by the Christ on Palm Sunday. When you see someone act with humility toward another, affirm their actions as being Christlike.

You have a chance to model to the world what Christ teaches us. Amen.

-van de Laar, John, "What the Powerful Fear," and found at <http://sacredise.com/blog/?p=923>

-Text: John 12:12-19

-Given: April 17, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Blessed is the One who opens the gates of righteousness.
Hosanna in the highest!

You are holy, God our Creator,
and blessed is Jesus Christ,
who comes in your grace.
When he could have filled your heart,
he poured himself out for us;
when he could have remained by your side,
he came to be a servant,
raising us to glory;
when he could have watched from heaven,
he came down to show us your heart;
when he could have taken the easy way,
he chose to be faithful to you,
even to the point of shameful death.
As he gathered up our brokenness
to make us whole,
you raised him to new life,
and he stands with us in eternity,
glorifying you forever.

As we remember the joy and excitement of the parade,
as we remember the gentle words he taught,
as we remember the spirit with which he died, we lift up our own prayers.