

## The Healing of The Relinquishment of Power.

Philippians 2:1-8; 2 Corinthians 1:24; John 15:12-15

Today's sermon is a challenging one, for me, for the church and for the nation: the Healing of The Relinquishment of Power.

Our nation is currently beset with authoritarianism run rampant — and the church is no exception. Exhibit A is the decision of recent SBC Annual Meeting to excise from its midst all churches with women pastors and with women in positions of pastoral leadership. Because they are fixated on the pastor as one having authority over the congregation, surely women must not be given that role! There are so many things wrong about all this, it's hard to know where to start.

But let me start with an admission. As a white male pastor, I have had a position of privilege in a cultural and ecclesiastical system of patriarchal and hierarchical cultural power. And I have often been blind to my own exertions of pastoral authority in such a system. As the Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote: "Oh the gift that God could give us, to see ourselves as others see us"—though we might not always be ready for such a gift!

A second beginning point. The healing of the relinquishment of power does not negate the importance of a healthy sense of personal power, especially for

those who have been on the “under side” of over/under relationships and social power systems. Feminist theologians, for example, speak of the need of women to have a sturdy and strong self of self.

With all this in mind, let’s proceed. First, let’s look at unequal power in relationships within the church.

I have a somewhat cynical working definition of what a sacrament has been in the long history of the church: *A sacrament is what we won’t let women do!* If the chief sacrament is the Eucharist and presiding over Communion, then that’s what women cannot do. If it is preaching, that’s what women cannot do.

What the SBC has been making clearer and clearer since 1984, when it first resolved that women cannot be ordained and be pastors, is that what women must not be allowed to attain is the pastoral office with its requisite role of having authority over the congregation. Its chief sacrament is, therefore, *power*. They keep talking about “pastoral authority” as if the words are supposed to belong together. Have they completely obscured the teachings and way of Jesus?

Remember when Jesus said of the religious leaders, “They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogue.” Then added, “But you are not to be called “rabbi” ...neither be called master...” Charlie Brown might say at this point, “Good grief!”

## II

So, let's look again at Jesus. To quote the Catholic theologian Hans Kung, his ministry had a "downward bent". Over and over he took the role of a servant—as when he washed his disciples feet. When the woman taken in adultery was about to be stoned by the men, he put his body between them and her. "Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down." When his own disciples hankered after power and authority he was swift to say, "You've got it all wrong!"

"You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. *But it must not be so among you!*"

Then he added, "For the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the many."

And we fight over pastoral authority?

In Paul's great hymn to Christ in Philippians 2, he is worried about ego battles in the church. So, he begins. "Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus",

Who though he was in the form of God

Did not count equality a thing to be grasped

But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.

Jesus divested himself of power! That doesn't sound very manly!

In 2 Corinthians, Paul is addressing a new problem. Those he calls "*hyper-apostoloi*", hyper-apostles, super apostles, have come into Corinth parading their great spiritual strengths and lording it over the new church. They also ridiculed Paul for his apparent weaknesses.

Paul said that these super apostles—he also called them *pseudo-apostoloi*, false apostles—preached "another Jesus" and a "different gospel". We see them all about today.

So, Paul countered by describing his ministry with them: "Not that we lord it over your faith, we "work with you for your joy." With you. For your joy. That's true ministry.

W.A. Criswell, pastor for many years at First Baptist Church, Dallas and godfather of the Fundamentalist take-over of the SBC, wrote in the 1980's:

"A laity-led, layman-led, deacon-led church will be a weak church anywhere.... The pastor is ruler of the church. There is no other thing in the Bible."

Again, the almost total eclipse of the historical Jesus. The Super-Apostles Cometh.

In face of the all this, in response to the utter disfigurement of the role of the pastor and the exclusion of women from that role, I have at times thought of renouncing my own ordination and refusing the title pastor. At Grace, where as our bulletin says we are all ministers, I am a minister among ministers.

In John's gospel, Jesus said to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants but friends". Everything God had given him he had given to them. The kingdom of God is not an over/under world and the exertion of power, but rather a society of friends, as the Quakers call themselves in their own revolution in the way of thinking about Christian community. Maybe if pastors were called "Friends", we would fight about it less. Might we be able to create a "boss-less" society, community, where we live together in the courtesies of love?

Jesus embodied a non-hierarchical form of leadership which some call "servant leadership". To that we now turn.

### III

Servant leadership applies to all arenas of life, family, church, business, social organizations, non-profits, political leadership. You may not think of yourself as a leader, but everyone has a sphere of leadership and influence. Parker Palmer, Quaker educator and spiritual writer, defines a leader as someone who has the unusual capacity to shed their light or cast their shadow side onto others. So he

says all leaders must lead *from within*. They must do their inner work so to maximize their light and minimize the shadow. Think of a parent, a business leader, a public leader. We all have our inner work to do, and some of it has to do with the relinquishment of a certain kind of power.

The term “servant leader” has been so discussed over the past few decades that it has almost become a cliché. But let’s examine it for our purposes today.

In the 1980’s Robert Greenleaf, an AT&T consultant, wrote an influential book on servant leadership. His test of true servant leadership is in the form of the following questions.

-Do those served grow as persons?

-Do those served, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to be servants?

-And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived?

What a great set of questions. Hear them one more time. It sounds like Paul: “We work with you, for your joy.”

Former Episcopal bishop in N.C., Bennett Sims wrote a book on servant leadership. He offered another criterion: are we willing to be influenced as well as to influence? Servant leaders are as willing to be influenced as to influence. This

applies to parents, organizational leaders, and leaders in church at all levels of leadership. Where are you willing to relinquish power and control in order to create a more healing environment? In Buddhist monasteries all the monks bow to each other. How do we, can we, in our own ways, bow to the divine in each of us?

Our two Davis speakers this past week, Diana and Brian will be helping lead a workshop retreat this coming year on overcoming patriarchy and hierarchy in the church and world. There is much conversation in this time of epochal change about “revisioning church”. Some of the revisioning must address such issues.

### Conclusion

Let me offer again the vision of the 19th century Shakers, founded by the way, by a woman prophet and visionary. It inspires me to think more deeply about church. They believed in the absolute spiritual equality of women and men— so much so that the community was led by a council comprising the same number of women and men. They believed that only men and women *together* could discern the mind of God for the community. They believed this so that if the community dwindled in numbers to the point there were no women to serve on the council, they disbanded the community.

What might their life together inspire in us? And I think about the Quakers who so believed in the inner light given to all that they developed a consensus method of decision making, a voteless democracy. It avoided divisive votes and what an early French observer of American democracy called “the tyranny of the majority.”

Let’s start the conversation today. It may go on and on for a while, not just in church and about the church, but in our hearts and minds as well.