

If the church were Christian, peace would be more important than power.

This past week, Joan and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary. **It's been a good 25 years, though we got off to a rocky start, due to my mistaken impression that the man was the head of the household.** It took Joan awhile to disabuse me of that notion. Most of our issues had to do with power. **I was on a St. Paul kick and believed wives should be subject to their husbands.** Joan was on an Adam and Eve kick, the one where God created Adam, then said, "Hmm, I think I can do better" and created Eve.

So we had this thicket of power we had to hack our way through, but we made it. At least, so far. One never knows. **There might be underbrush in our future.** So we'll have to keep the tools sharpened and ready. In any relationship, you always have to be ready to work.

The first years of our marriage were tricky, then we learned a great truth which smoothed our road a bit. That truth was this: One can aspire to power, or one can aspire to peace, but one seldom gets both.

We've been talking about if the church were Christian. **Today, I'm inviting us to think about peace and power, and I want to do that by observing that for much of its history the church has been about the accumulation of power, which has made the attainment of peace unlikely.**

I once pastored a church that had twelve people and thirteen committees, so shortly after I began there, I suggested we have one committee comprised of six members, each of whom would have responsibility for a specific ministry of the church. When that idea was first announced, one of the members in the meeting came to me and said, "I want to be on that committee."

I said, "I appreciate your willingness to serve, but that's not up to me. I'm just the pastor. But I'll tell the nominating committee you would like to considered"

He said, "You tell them if I'm not asked to be on that committee, I will leave."

I didn't know him well, since I had just started, but because his leaving meant an 8.3% decline in membership, I suggested to the clerk of the meeting we let him serve. The clerk, a very wise woman, said, "If we do, we will be teaching him that he can hold us hostage to get his way. Do you think giving him power is a good idea?"

Well, not when I thought about it in those terms. **So he wasn't asked to serve, and when the new committee was announced at the next monthly meeting for business, he gathered his things, walked out, and never returned.** The thing was, we really missed him. He had many virtues. He was creative and hard-working. He was our friend. It's just that his hunger for power made working with him difficult.

When I think of him, I think of the times I've tried to maneuver myself into a position of power so that I could get my way. I've been more subtle than him, but no less determined. **But it always alienated others, made others pull away from me.** I've noticed that in my marriage, and I've noticed that in the church. But still, power is so tempting. Remember in the temptation of Jesus, described in the fourth chapter of Matthew's gospel, when Jesus is transported by the devil to a mountain-top and is offered power over everything and everyone he can see? Do you remember that? **That was a real struggle for Jesus.** Temptations are potent because they represent something we desperately want. Otherwise, it isn't a temptation. Jesus is able to turn away from this temptation, but the effort to resist is so taxing, so draining, he finds himself in need of an angel's care. **I'd never noticed that before, but there it is.** "Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him." **So if it was hard for Jesus to resist the lure of power, it might also be difficult for you and me.**

I'm not sure what it is about religion that attracts those who long for power, but it does seem to be a magnet, does seem to tug and pull people toward the church who yearn for authority and control. **Even the Apostle Paul, who wrote so movingly about love not insisting on its own way, stormed off in a snit when his closest friend, Barnabas, disagreed with him.**

The history of the church is the history of power, of power sought, of power accumulated, of power abused.

It is James and John, wondering which of them will have a higher place in heaven.

It is the disciples, angered when outsiders heal the sick in Jesus's name.

It is Constantine, using the church to consolidate his political power. Aren't you glad that's no longer done?

It is the Roman church's insistence that it alone is the way of salvation.

It is Quakerism's willingness to split rather than forgive.

If the church were Christian, peace would be more important than power. **And here's the difference: Power is primarily interested in what others can do for it, peace is primarily interested in what it can do for others.**

So Jesus is with his disciples. **He knows this tension between peace and power.** He knows how power can tempt, how power can corrupt. He knows modesty and humility are the antidote, but so hard to attain. He doesn't give a lecture. Rather, he gives an example. **He fills a basin with water and begins to wash his disciple's feet.** They're embarrassed and uncomfortable. "We should wash your feet," they say.

"No, you call me your teacher and Lord. Now, if I am your teacher and Lord and I do this for you, maybe you can do this for one another."

It is a whole different understanding of power, where you are so at peace with who you are that you have nothing to prove, and having nothing to prove, you can happily serve anyone and everyone. You can do the most humble work and find joy and meaning in it.

At a meeting I used to pastor was a woman who'd grown up in a little Brethren church where every year they washed one another's feet in a religious ritual. **She'd moved to the city, began worshipping with us, and one year, right before Easter, she said, "Let's have a footwashing."** Well, I knew Quakers didn't have outward baptism and communion, but no one had ever said anything about footwashing. And she was such a wonderful lady and we all thought so highly of her that we didn't want to tell her no, so we said, "We're going to have a footwashing. Y'all come."

There was another woman in the congregation who was mentally ill and belligerent and had made veiled threats against our older son, who was a baby at the time. It had angered me, and I'd told her not to come back. "Don't ever come back here." I'd never told anyone that before, and haven't since, but I told her. **But the rest of the congregation didn't know that, so when they phoned folks to invite them to the footwashing, they called her, and she came, walking in at the last moment, taking the one empty seat, right next to me, which meant I had to wash her feet.** She was dirty, she wore ratty old sandals, I was still mad at her, and I didn't want to touch her stinky feet. But I didn't know how to get out of it. **I kept trying to figure out how, maybe faking appendicitis or hitting myself on the head with a hammer.** Some subtle maneuver to get out of washing her feet.

But there was no escaping it, so I was scrubbing her feet, resenting it, thinking to myself, "There's a lesson in this. I don't know what it is, but there's a lesson here somewhere." **Man, her feet were dirty.** I wanted to ask her, "Where in the world have you been?" I just kept scrubbing them, and the more I scrubbed, I began thinking how weird it felt to wash someone's feet. **It's just weird.** I mean I washed my son's feet, but he was a baby and I was supposed to care for him. Then I thought, "Well, maybe I'm supposed to care for her, too. Maybe we're supposed to all care for one another. Maybe that's the lesson."

As soon as I thought that, I stopped being mad at her. And when she left that meetinghouse, she had the cleanest feet in Indiana. **I don't know how she felt, but I felt great.** I felt so at peace. I don't like carrying a grudge. It's such hard work to be mad all the time. I felt at peace. It was a good feeling.

Power asks, "What can you do for me?"

Peace asks, "What can I do for you?"

If the church were Christian, it would care more about peace than power.