

# “From Power to Empathy”

*A Sermon on Empathy, Belonging, and the Politics of Love*

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Last week, we introduced the theme of downward mobility as we make our way toward Easter this Lent. Jesus says, “Who ever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” We showed how our very nature—biologically, psychologically, and neurologically—is hardwired to increase our relative status, and therefore how strange it is that Jesus calls us to lower ourselves with one another.

And we saw how: those who most aggressively pursue greatness tend to produce the opposite effect on the people around them—it lowers them. The person who needs to be seen as great will make everyone else feel smaller. But the person who serves makes everyone else feel more significant will create the kind of community Jesus desires for us.

This same theme continues today—and intensifies—in our text, Matthew 20: 25-28 [ESV]:

*25 but Jesus Called Them to Him and Said, “You Know That the Rulers of the Gentiles Lord It Over Them, and Their Great Ones Exercise Authority Over Them. 26 It Shall Not Be So Among You. But Whoever Would Be Great Among You Must Be Your Servant, 27 and Whoever Would Be First Among You Must Be Your Slave, 28 Even as the Son of Man Came Not To Be Served but To Serve, and To Give his Life as a Ransom for Many.”†*

## Lording It Over Others

Jesus says, “The Gentiles Lord it over them.” Again, this is the way of the world, the way of our biology and neurology, but Jesus says, “It will not be so among you.” We need to look at this difference, check our historical scorecard, and check our Christian hearts for whatever obstacles keep us from living as Jesus calls us to live.

We all get “Lording it over,” don’t we? From our youngest years, we had over siblings to order us, babysitters, teachers, bosses. The word boss sums it up. Now, when I order a coffee and the barista is hispanic or Haitian, and they call me boss, I know it’s a friendly humility, but it still feels good. It feels respectful, and who doesn’t appreciate that?

The word boss comes from an old Dutch word meaning something like Uncle, but quickly became associated with order, rule, and lording it over others. If you ever had a bad boss, you know what that feels like—there is a pecking order in this world and you are the one getting pecked. The inevitable result of that is a bad relationship—bitterness, resentment, and a destroyed sense of teamwork. If you enjoy being bossed around, there is something not quite right with you.

So, we get it. Lordship of this kind creates brokenness, bitterness, resentment, and rule by fear, terror, and tyranny—this is the way human beings are.

## The Church's Historical Scorecard

So Jesus has told his people to do things differently—not to lord it over one another like all the other worldly authorities, but to see oneself as a servant—or slave—to one another, just as he came to us not to be served but to give himself as a ransom for many. So how have we done—we the Church—through history?

How long did it take from the Apostles (all of whom literally poured out their lives for the gospel), to the Popes? Not long.

One defining characteristic of Rome and Romans—compared to Greeks or others of the ancient world—was their obsession with order. Government, hierarchy, and order were their buzzwords. From their governing structure, through their unmatched military, they were about order.

And almost as soon as Constantine converted to Christianity, that worldly obsession with order, rule, and lording it over one another infiltrated the Roman church.

Historians claim Pope Leo the First—also called “Leo the Great”—was the first to prominently and regularly use the title Pontifex Maximus, but there is evidence that Pope Siricius used the term as early as the 380s. Pontifex Maximus was originally a pagan Roman priestly title — held by Roman emperors as part of their religious authority, their total lordship over others.

So, from the Roman Emperor Constantine's conversion (he wasn't baptized until 337), it took roughly 40 years to go from being a persecuted religious minority to Pontifex Maximus—the greatest ruler, the Emperor himself, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The Pope (which literally means “Father” (which Jesus told us not to call one another), has been called the Pontiff ever since. So, I'd say we rate a solid F on this count.

Reformers were desperate to break up papal authority, which is clearly a return to Scripture and scriptural authority, but thousands poured out their very lives to secure this reform. They rightly proclaimed that all authority in Heaven and on Earth belongs to Christ alone, and through Scripture as he speaks through his Word to the Church and world.

We do not play little lords over one another or anyone else. We acknowledge all lordship, reign, rule, and authority belong to Jesus Christ alone.

But every time a charismatic leader rises up among the people and claims to be speaking for God, or speaking with God's authority, we risk pulling that authority back down to earth and reinventing some new form of Pontifex Maximus. Which, according to Our Lord Jesus, we must not do.

Reformers—most notably John Calvin—articulated how power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The case in point was the worldly power and lordship of the papacy, but Scripture is clear on the fallenness of all humanity and our tendency toward tyranny.

Because we are human beings—fallen human beings with messed-up neurology—given time, we will recreate tyranny, oppression, and world horrors. That’s just how we’re made and the way of the world.

So with the Reformation came the great suspicion of power. How can the Church wield its derivative, legitimate authority without going rotten?

First, we follow the biblical model—spread it out widely enough that no one gets overwhelmed by the lure of power.

In the wilderness, under Moses’ leadership, rule was shared by a group of elders. Don’t for a second imagine early Israel was a democracy, because if the people had voted, they would have gone back to Egypt again and again.

The early church’s first sign of organization was not a king or pope, but ruling elders—a group of leaders who saw themselves as servants collectively seeking God’s will for their direction. What worldly power or authority they had was never centralized, but dissolved into the group. This was Calvin’s antidote to the tendency toward tyranny, and this principle of distributed power became central to the establishment of American government as well. We split up worldly power and keep it divided so that no one goes power-crazy, which it is our nature to do.

Scorecard? Call it a B+.

## Modernism Plus

It’s fair to say everyone has authority problems of some kind. It’s deeply embedded in the West. For the past 150 years, civilization has defined itself and its issues almost purely in terms of power. How has power? Who does not? Oppressors and the oppressed, haves and have-nots—probably 90% of what we call political issues in the West are power issues. Who gets to say? Who speaks for whom? Why can’t the little guy be in control for a change?

Popular social movements—and virtually all of what goes by the name of social justice—involve power and redressing power inequities. This is politics, and many of us are sick with fatigue over the rhetoric. Because of power issues, the US has become politically deadlocked, and the houses of Congress and the Senate have become major underachievers.

But what if it doesn’t have to be this way? What if the teachings of Christ are pointing us to a way of being and living together that is truer to God’s intentions for us?

An amazing thing has happened in science during our times. It involves MRI machines and brain scans. We are finding out at an amazing rate that many of our ideas about what human beings are are wrong.

In the late 90s, scientists were working on brain scans of macaque monkeys and something happened.

[\[Video: Empathy and Power\]](#)

From the time of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, the dominant assumption about humanity is that we are hard-wired for power—that power is the central motor of human striving. This assumption has shaped all of our politics and is behind all of our social justice issues. But what if it is completely wrong?

This is what science has revealed: We were wrong about humanity.

The number one driver of the human being is belonging. We are driven to belong even more forcefully than the drive and will to power. This is nothing short of amazing, and it will change everything in time.

What would a society look like that was uninterested in power but highly motivated to ensure that everyone feels that they belong? What would it look like if the politics of power were replaced by the politics of empathy?

Not everyone needs to rule, but everyone needs to belong.

Belonging is the fruit of loving our neighbors—even our enemies. It's not about power and control—lording it over others—but acknowledging the value of every other human being made in God's image.

What would America look like if everyone stopped talking about who's in power and who ought to be in power but instead asked, How ought we—who belong to each other as Americans—to work out our differences?

## Pouring Yourself Out

Today's term for downward mobility is pouring oneself out. Jesus said, "The son of man came not to be served but to serve and pour out his life as a ransom for many."

Christ calls us to serve, not to be served. The alternative to worldly power and lording it over one another—bossing each other around—is to volunteer ourselves to be helpful.

We're here to be givers, not takers.

We each can say, "I'm here to serve—first the Lord, second my neighbor."

Doesn't that sound familiar? The whole of the Law and the Prophets are summed up in these two, says Jesus.

Love God, Love neighbor as yourself.

At camp, when I was 10 years old, the entire week's theme was "I'm Third." They explained it as JOY: Jesus first, Others second, Yourself third. I've not only never forgotten that, but failed to improve on it by any amount of articulate erudition.