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# The Fourth Sunday of Lent

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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Whenever I hear verses about God using the “foolish” to shame the so-called “wise,” or the weak of the world—the impoverished, the marginalized, the oppressed—to overthrow the successful and powerful, I get a little uncomfortable: I feel a bit ill-at-ease; I squirm more than a smidgen in my chair. Because there’s no doubt in my mind that I enjoy a lot of privilege, far more than most other humans on this Earth: white, male, educated, the list goes on and on. So when Paul writes about God working through the weak and oppressed to “shame” the self-glorifying authority of the powerful, I uneasily wonder: “What am I supposed to do?” I can’t physically shed my skin; I can’t unlearn my education. And, I think to myself, what good would any of that do anyway? It’s not like poor people are going to become less impoverished if I simply throw away the privileges I personally have been given.

But while a radical divestment of all my privilege is unlikely to be beneficial, and perhaps not even possible, I still think that Paul’s critiques of power extend to us a very helpful challenge, which is also a great gift: offering us a shift of perspective that frees us from the oppression of living by the hopeless rules of power which dominate so much of our world.

Paul invites all of his readers—rich and poor, privileged and oppressed—into a fundamentally different way of perceiving life, how to live it, and how to measure success. And important for us is that he does so in a way that offers good news—hope—not only to the downtrodden poor but also to the privileged and well-off. Paul offers this hope by contrasting two basic ways to approach life, two fundamentally different ways to “get things done”: one is the way of power, and the other is the way of the cross.

Examples of the way of power are obvious: bulldozing forests and polluting waterways to make more money; redlining and redistricting to keep poor people poor and to disenfranchise as many minorities as possible. The list goes on and on.

But as much as we might want to distance ourselves from such examples, human beings like us tend to find power attractive. Although we might oppose specific practices of racial, economic, and ecological injustice that serve the interests of the mighty, we nevertheless have an almost innate desire, at a basic human level, to be associated with power rather than weakness, with success not failure, with cleanliness not squalor. Given the choice of having dinner with a homeless resident of Pine Street Inn or

Gov. Healey, I'm guessing 99% of us, including me, are going to dinner with the governor. Given the choice of raising our families in a safe and clean neighborhood or on a street where crime is common, we naturally gravitate towards safety.

And in making such choices, we find ourselves caught in something of a bind, because on the one hand, as followers of Jesus, we don't want to perpetuate the injustices that feed the way of power, but on the other hand, we inherently like the benefits—the safety, the cleanliness—that come from living in a powerful country that has utilized and continues to utilize the way of power to attain those very benefits.

Shoko and I live in Coolidge Corner, Brookline. We really enjoy having literally seven different supermarkets within walking distance of our apartment: a Shaw's, Stop-n-Shop, Trader Joe's, a Whole Foods, two Japanese supermarkets, and an H-Mart. An embarrassment of gustatory riches to say the least. At the same time, following Jesus' example, we theoretically applaud economic justice initiatives and lament the concentration of resources into fewer and fewer hands. We lament in theory (more or less), because honestly we like those seven supermarkets, and we really like the ease and the choice of having so many resources at our disposal. Yeah, we theoretically oppose this concentration of wealth in Coolidge Corner, while there's a food desert just a few miles south in West Roxbury. But are we really willing to give up our food paradise, move out of our cozy neighborhood, and head into the food desert? We find ourselves in a bind, because we both want and don't want to change, and we also wonder whether giving up our privilege would actually do any good.

Yet all the while we know that this unjust, unequal way of power operates at an enormous cost. Just as we recognize our attraction to it, I think we, perhaps especially here at St. Anne's, are also aware of the immense suffering the way of power produces. The way of power is a way that knows no grace, no mercy. It's the way of collateral damage justified as part of the cost of business: collateral damage in the sense of a demolished middle-class and a ballooning impoverished class so that the richest of the American rich can grow richer; collateral damage in the sense of greater noise, air, and water pollution so that more private jets can fly out of Hanscom airfield; collateral damage in the sense of suppressing access to knowledge—in recent months, literally banning books—so that specific political interests can be advanced.

And because of this collateral damage, because this way of power can never shake the injustice it causes, the injustice at its core, this way is ultimately a hopeless way. At the end of the day, the way of power's promises ultimately prove to be empty and hollow, manipulative smoke-and-mirrors, because in the end the way of power knows no higher mission than the perpetuation and consolidation of power itself. For all its grand slogans and tremendous promises, ultimately the way of power is only about getting more power: it's ultimately a self-serving operation devoted to nothing beyond itself and therefore is an exercise in hopelessness. As the great psychologist Erik Erikson has shown, a life dedicated to the consolidation of personal power or wealth or glory with little-to-no concern for others is virtually guaranteed to foster, in Erikson's words, existential "despair." Thus because of power's inherent logic of my interests before yours, those riding power's self-serving way find themselves on a highway of hopelessness.

But the way of the cross, is in every respect, different. To name just three examples:

First: Whereas the way of power is initially attractive, the way of the cross repulses; it goes against basic survival instincts. By Paul's own admission, the way of the cross appears before us as a way of total "foolishness." "Setting aside my interests for the good of others? Why would I want to do that? Life is short: I don't have much time to enjoy it; I don't have much time to gladden my own heart, so why expend energy trying to 'gladden the hearts of others'—as our closing blessing sometimes reads? Why would I take on the additional duty of easing others' burdens before my own? Isn't it just 'wise' to take care of myself first: to strap on my own oxygen mask before thinking of others? Surely it's got to be foolish to put others' welfare before my own." The way of the cross, in short, is foolish and repulsive.

A second contrast: Whereas the way of power leads to personal benefit for which others bear the cost—"collateral damage"—the way of the cross leads to personal sacrifice from which others enjoy the benefit. Such sacrifice can fall anywhere along a huge spectrum, from relatively small sacrifices, like giving up one dinner out and donating the money to a local homeless shelter all the way up to enormous sacrifices, like laying down one's very life for the good of others, such as Dr. King's martyrdom for the sake of equal rights, or just last month, Aleksei Navalny's

martyrdom at the hands of Putin's power machine for the sake of a democratic Russia.

The way of power attracts; the way of the cross repulses. The way of power justifies collateral damage for my benefit; the way of the cross demands self-sacrifice for the good of others. And finally, one last—but game-changing—contrast: Whereas the way of power's obsession with my personal benefit—me before you—ultimately feeds a gnawing despair, the sacrificial way of the cross leads, in the end, to joy, freedom, and a strength stronger than the way of power can ever know: joy and freedom from the need to dominate; the freedom to not have to appear powerful in the world's eyes, not needing to desperately “succeed” and to pay any price for success; the strength of being able to let go and not need to get your way; the freedom to not need seven supermarkets, and the inner strength of possessing a steady and deep joy not dependent upon the immediate gratification of every conceivable desire.

The good news, particularly for us in a place like Lincoln, MA, is that we have a choice: while the way of power is by definition open only to the powerful, the way of the cross is open to all. We, the relatively privileged, have a choice here, which is denied to those on the margins. Due to our wealth, education, and other advantages, we do have the option of trying to succeed by means of the powerful way. And truth be told, in order to function in our daily jobs, we may have to fit into the flow of the world's way of operating, at least to some degree. But as Christians, it is a gift given to us by God to know a deeper, more joyful, more foolishly wise way of living, the way of Christ crucified, the way of the cross.

Christ leads us in this way of the cross—particularly during this season of Lent—and it is “Christ crucified” that we preach to the greatest extent possible in our words and lives. While we might not be able to lose all of our privilege for the sake of Christ, or to fully shake the influence of worldly power in our daily lives, we certainly can find opportunities where a “way of power” might be resisted by the “way of the cross.” While Shoko and I are not quite ready to ship out of comfy Coolidge Corner, we certainly can make the most of laying down some part of our privilege—donating our time, resources, or energies—so that other lives might be more enriched. Each of us might ask, for instance, where in our workplace or our home life we could replace a “way of power” approach with a “Christ crucified” approach: how we

might interact with our colleagues or family members in a way not characterized by worldly norms of power but by a Christ-like emptying of ourselves, a setting aside of our personal interests for the sake of others. Ironically, it is often most difficult to let the way of the cross guide our interactions with those closest to us, those whom we bump into at 3am when we're stumbling to the bathroom. How might we each take a "way of the cross" approach to those with whom we share a roof, and maybe even a bed?

At the end of the day, key to any success in adopting the way of the cross is that this is the way of "Christ crucified"; it's not the way of "Joe crucified" or "Jane crucified." By which I mean, the way of the cross only works if we depend upon and surrender to the power of Christ. Trying to walk in the cross' way by my own internal strength, just gritting it out, is sure to fail. Asking for Christ's strength, letting Christ have control, is crucial each and every day. But, empowered by the love of Christ for us and for those we aim to serve, we are set free: set free from judging ourselves according to the merciless logic of worldly power standards, set free from society's addiction to the hopeless way of power accumulation, set free in perfect security to live lives of sacrificial service, profound inner freedom, and ultimate joy. Amen.

