

From Power to Kenosis

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[0 : 00] So today, on this MLK weekend, we wanted to start the year, one, with a new series that we're calling Shift, Restarting or Starting a Faith That Can Fully Bloom.

We wanted to talk for the next month or so about what it means to think about small change that is not compulsive but is about freedom, that is about joy.

And we, in particular, wanted to talk about things that are, in some ways, foundational to our faith, to what it means to be community and to grow as disciples.

So we're going to talk about things today. We're going to talk about power. We're going to talk about enchantment. We're going to talk about things like what it means to take action and to become embodied and what it means to, and this is the phrase that Pastor Anthony came up with, what it means to, instead of feeling compulsion to change, to feel freedom to grow.

So we're going to talk about these shifts that we think are pretty important individually in our community for the next couple of weeks. So today we're starting with power because we're always talking about, you know, at the heart of this community and at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus is to think about and to walk in love, fundamentally to walk in love.

[1 : 32] And yet to walk in love, you have to be thinking about power, talking about power. Paul Tillich, who's a fairly influential theologian of the 20th century, talked about love and power as these two drives that we've got to be thinking about.

The ways in which we can mishandle power, but also the ways in which we need power. To be powerless diminishes you in your soul. So we have to be talking about this.

And then one of my favorite quotes by Dr. King to get us started here is this one. You probably, you may have heard it. Power without love is reckless and abusive.

Love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. And justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

So we're going to have a conversation over the next couple minutes about power from kind of two different directions, from our particular perspectives. I think we probably both have some notes, but maybe we'll go viral with some odd moment.

[2 : 51] We'll see. We'll see. All right. So the first thing we're going to talk about, and I think the questions, we're going to frame this around three questions. They'll be up there, I think. Is why is it important for our community to start the year talking about power?

And how are concerns about power important for this community and our discipleship? So I have to admit here that I have many things I want to say, but we have about 15 minutes.

So I will try to keep this short. So one I'll say that I think it's important to start here as a community because we talk a lot about proclaiming a more beautiful gospel, a gospel that is emotionally healthy and that is about our flourishing and our freedom and the flourishing of all creation.

And yet we know that our faith was deeply affected and has been deeply affected by a moment in history when under Constantine, Christianity in the third century became an imperial religion.

It became the religion of the empower and married itself to power, became concerned with how to become powerful in the ways that the empire understood that.

[4 : 07] So we've always got to be thinking about what does it mean to move against that current in the way of Jesus? I love 2 Corinthians 12 9 says, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

So to live into this more beautiful gospel, we have to be cultivating actually weakness and vulnerability. And it feels odd to say that in a city that is deeply about power, but that's part of what it means to be a disciple.

Otherwise, we get a malformed church and a malformed community and a malformed faith. I could give a bunch of examples. I think I'll just give like two. I think that in Genesis, we sometimes forget that when God creates the world, God creates in non-coercive love.

There are stories that underlie Genesis 1 about God and this kind of chaos monster, it's called in Near Eastern mythology. That's woven into Genesis 1.

And God doesn't actually destroy chaos. Chaos, if you read it in the original languages, Genesis 1 is woven into that story. Instead of God trampling over in might, God weaves in.

[5 : 24] How do we talk about that? How do we talk about being created in the image of God as God democratizing power so that not just royal folks had power? Can I break in too?

Is this mic working? Maybe a little. Yeah, and even the language of Genesis 1, let there be. Let there be. Let the earth produce green plants.

Let the earth produce animals, all of that. God is relinquishing control. So God's power, like creation, we talk about it in kids' stories about the amazing power of God.

And what Genesis 1 is, is God's relinquishing of control in order for creation to do its thing. That is God's ultimate power of, in the words of the genie from Aladdin, infinite cosmic powers that he's giving over.

That God is giving over to creation. That's all I want to do. Yeah, the other thing, I mean, there's so many examples. Grappling with power is woven throughout Scripture.

[6 : 24] Another is simply in Genesis 3, right at the beginning of Scripture. There seems to, you know, you have these two people, Adam and Eve, who are created in the image of God. They have power, and yet they want to be like God.

There's something there about wanting to hold power differently than we're made to. So we have to be thinking about that. Another really important, I think, place to go in Scripture is 1 Samuel 8, when these people who are the children of Israel are in covenant with God, and they decide, you know what, we want a king.

And the king, that text says, will take and take and take. And yet, there's a way that we envision our community becoming people of power very often.

So we have to be grappling with that. And then the last thing I'll just say is, it's important for us to talk about this, because we're in this merger process. And so we have to be talking about how various people, various backgrounds hold privileged power versus other folks.

Like, it's an important conversation to be having in every space at the table. Yeah, yeah. So the question is why it's important. And looking at the life of Jesus, I see that God's, Jesus' love is not power blind.

[7 : 36] So you can talk about color blindness in terms of race. Well, everybody has the same opportunity. I don't want to look at people based on color. But there are problems with that, because society is set up in such a way to elevate usually white folks and to make sure that black and brown folks can't have access to the same wealth or privileges or schools or jobs or whatever as the white folks are elevated.

So that's color blindness doesn't work. Talk about gender blindness. Like, oh, you know, I just want to, I don't care about male, female, or anybody in between. I just, you know, want everybody to have the same opportunity. Yet that ignores the generations and generations of scripts that have been handed down of like, well, but women in particular, they aren't built for a certain kind of jobs. They aren't built for a certain kind of responsibilities. And so you can come around and say like, well, I'm just going to ignore all that. But you're ignoring the generations of scripts that have been handed down. And the same thing is true of power, that God's love interacts with the world, and it's not power blind.

Yes, it is true. God loves everyone. And yet, who did Jesus decide to spend his time with? It was with those who did not have power. Favorite example of this is Matthew chapter 4.

Jesus begins his earthly ministry. He starts the proclamation. Repent, believe. The kingdom of God is at hand. It's shown up. It's here. And so people from all around begin to follow this Jesus, specifically people who are diseased, demon-possessed, or hungry.

[9 : 11] And then, Matthew chapter 5, very next chapter, Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with this famous list of what are called Beatitudes, which are basically words of blessing. And the words of blessing are, blessed are the meek.

Blessed are the hungry. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who don't have access to power. He's saying, blessed are you all who follow me, because you're the ones that society has either ignored, or worse yet, they haven't ignored.

They've purposely put in a place that you will not have the same access as the elite. So yes, God loves everyone, and yet God's love is not power blind. Jesus shows up in the world in a certain place, geography, social sphere, social class, access to money, access to power.

Jesus shows up there, and that shows us something true about God. So it's important for churches, communities of Jesus' disciples to be talking about this, because it was something that Jesus was very much conscious of.

Therefore, we have to be as well. Are you going to blow our minds again with Mary's song, The De-Crucifying? The De-Crucifying?

[10:22] You have to say something about that. Oh, I don't know. I don't know. Did I say something brilliant once? I don't remember. So the first December I was here, Anthony preached a sermon, blew my mind.

I was like, this is the church for me. This is it. I'm here. Because you talked about the passage where Mary is praising God in Luke and talks about, you know, sending the rich away empty. You talked about this Greek word that essentially means to, like, take down from the cross. So in some way, folks who have power and influence and economic privilege, particularly in that passage, it's like they're being taken down from crosses.

And I just found that so profound that, like, when we talk about power... Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, I remember. This should give you hope. If you don't remember my sermons, neither do I.

Luke chapter 1. It's the Magnificat. Luke chapter 1, verse 52. He, the Lord, has brought down rulers from their thrones. That brought down is to remove a body from a cross.

[11:29] Yeah. So, yeah, which I'll talk about this in a second. But, yeah, Jesus reckons with power, but he also redefines power. And the idea that the thrones of rulers are actually the crosses that they are dying upon without even realizing it is radically redefining what power is from a divine perspective.

There you go. Did I blow your mind again? Yeah. Okay, good. It's so good. It's just, it's so good to me. All right, ready to second Philippians? Yeah. So, yeah, our scripture that we've been focusing on, you might have noticed this in the service, is Philippians 2, 1 through 8.

I'm just going to ground us in that very quickly. And read it again. Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility, think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus. Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

[12:54] But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

So, I know enough Greek to know that I don't know enough Greek. I know enough Greek to be dangerous, but I know enough to know to trust some other scholars when it comes to some of these things.

And one of my favorite scholars is a gentleman by Michael Gorman and another gentleman, the late Robert Mulholland, which was a professor of mine. And they both pointed out that there's this interesting thing right at the beginning of this hymn.

It's called the Kenotic Hymn. Now, kenosis is a Greek word. It can mean emptying or pouring out, basically divesting yourself of the powers or privileges that you have.

And it says that though Jesus was in the very nature of God, made himself nothing. That's the word kenosis. He poured himself out. He made himself nothing. And this Kenotic Hymn, and if you have like a Bible, you can see it's kind of in verse format.

[14:07] It's probably a very early Christian song. It says something which I think is amazing about the nature of God. Jesus, in the very nature of God, did not consider quality of God something to be used to his own advantage, but made himself nothing.

Now, if you're like me, I imagine this as a point in time. That there was a moment where Christ was up in heaven doing divinely awesome things. And there was a point in time in which he made himself nothing and became human.

And yes, I believe that there is this historical fact that there was a moment of the incarnation where the Christ became born as Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary.

That was a moment in time. But this idea of a God who empties themselves, what Dr. Mulholland and Dr. Gorman point out in the Greek is this idea of ongoing, reoccurring event.

It's something that has always been true about God, is true of God right now, and will always be true about God. That God has always been the type of God who empties themselves.

[15:15] So it's not as though God for an infinite number of years was supremely powerful, supremely awesome, and then like, ah, you know what, I have a better idea, and then came Jesus.

It's that in the center of the triune divine reality is a cross, is kenosis, is the divine emptying and outpouring.

Which gets back to my point about Genesis 1, that creation is an act of divine self-divestment. Of God was not content leaving the universe as solely the divine trinity, and that's it, but rather gave up space for there to be creation, for there to be you and me.

And so God's very nature, God's, God's most divine, is a God of giving up. The God of infinite cosmic powers, who always has been, is right now, and always will be giving up those powers. So I really love this passage of scripture. I love, there's a little book by Henry Nowen called The Selfless Way of Christ, and he talks about what he terms downward mobility.

[16:34] So in our culture where we're constantly thinking about kind of money and power and influence, how do we think about within our faith lives downward mobility? Where is that appropriate?

How do we need to be moving into that as a community and as individuals? So I love that, and I love this piece of scripture, and I also struggle with it, if I'm honest. Because there's, in my heart, for me, in my mind, there's this question about what does it mean to self-empty if you are already at the bottom?

To move down implies that you have somewhere to go. And that is not the case for, you know, all folks in society. So we've got to be thinking and talking about that, talking about, you know, economic privilege and privilege that comes with race and culture and language and citizenship. How do we think about those things, and what does it mean to self-empty when you have very few or none of those privileges? And I, I, all of this kind of clicked in me, the tension I feel around this, when I read Richard Beck, who's a psychologist and also writes theology.

In his writing about kenosis, he talks about kenosis as the privilege of the privileged. And that really resonated and resonates with me.

[17:57] So what does it mean to pour out, to empty out, when you are at the bottom of the hierarchy of power? And here's what he says, and I think this kind of sums it up really, really well.

That if you are at the bottom, emptying out means casting out all the things, becoming indifferent to all the ways that society values you.

It's actually like almost a spitting up, a vomiting of the images and lies that you've been told about yourself. Yeah, that's right. So in relation to power, we all have different work.

What's being emptied out is this hierarchy of being, becoming indifferent to it. Things like thinking about social and cultural standards of significance, success versus failure, worthiness versus unworthiness.

Whether you've been taught that you're whole and ideal or damaged just because of who you are. So I want to name that. Considering what your work is in terms of self-emptying is really important.

[19:05] Yeah, I think in Jesus' life, you see him. He recognizes power. In any given space that Jesus walks into, Jesus recognizes all the different things at play.

About gender, about religious elites, Galileans and Judeans, Rome and Palestine. Jesus recognizes all that.

He then redistributes that power and he redefines it. Example. Story of Jesus and the woman who is caught in adultery is how we commonly tell the story.

But really it's about these murderous men who entrap Jesus and they trap this woman. And Jesus is shown a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery.

The man is nowhere to be seen. Again, it's a trap. She's thrown in front of Jesus and they're ready to stone her for the sin of adultery. So what does Jesus do?

[20 : 02] Jesus recognizes the power at play. It's a bunch of men, murderous men, holding stones in their hand. Jesus, he doesn't identify with the power holders. He rather gets down on the ground with the woman and starts doodling.

We don't know what. The men, oldest to youngest, drop their stones because Jesus says, whoever's without sin, cast the first stone. The men walk away. The woman walks up. Jesus says, where have your condemners gone? She says, they've left. What does Jesus do? Jesus doesn't then hand her a stone and say, let it rip.

Okay? He recognizes the power. He redistributes the power. Everyone puts down their stone. And it's not then as though it's now the woman's right to be, now you're the stone holder.

Now you're the executioner. No, rather it's, neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more. Go live a new life without these strings of power attached to you.

[20 : 59] So it's, this is a quote from two Episcopalian priests that I follow, Matt Tebbe and Ben Sternke. They write, God's love in Jesus works inside current systems of power to bring equity and justice to the marginalized and the oppressed, while and at the same time seeking to subvert and upend the current systems of power that create the conditions for inequity and injustice to begin with.

In other words, God's love doesn't simply put new people on top of old oppressive hierarchies. It's not the business that we're part of. But God's love seeks to topple the unjust hierarchies and shows us how to live together in love, practicing justice and peace with one another to establish communion and love with one another and God.

Yeah, and I'll just add to that. Learning from, you know, activists and organizers of Res City made me think a lot more about the way in which just embedded in the history of this country and Western history are the polarities of black and white.

white, black. And when you specifically, and I want to name this particular on MLK Day, move against anti-black racism, like you're messing with the whole system.

Like because the system is built on these two polar opposites or things that are considered polar opposites. So I want to name that too, right? The point is not to then shift it around. It is to break the thing because you've touched the root of it.

[22 : 35] That's right. That's right. Yeah. Yeah. Question three. Yeah. Go for it. All right. So here's the last question we'll talk through. Along with self-emptying, another way to shift our relationship with power in a spiritually formative direction is to share power.

How is sharing power spiritually formative? What scriptural examples support it? And how can we embody this in our community? So the first thing I would say, sociology follows theology.

God's power is non-coercive. We see that in the ways that God, though it is full of power, but that power looks, for example, like creating seed-bearing plants.

They have potentiality that is not coerced within themselves. All right. That's what God, that's how God holds power. And we have to be thinking about that. Another obvious example is the Trinity. Right? This mutuality that exists even in inside of God in the sharing of power. I know that often we focus on the one voice when we talk about movements or, you know, in our society, particularly with the civil rights movement, we only talk so much about Dr. King.

[23 : 47] When there are all these other people from, you know, the, you know, Septima Clarks and the Paulie Murrays and Fannie Lou Hamers to people who are like cooking fried chicken and handing it out to like marchers.

You've got all these people, but we focus on the one voice. And in scripture, that happens too. We tend to talk about Moses, but Moses, Moses and Aaron and Miriam were kind of hanging out together doing the thing.

That's right. But we don't really talk about that, right? Jesus works in team as well. These layers of team. And then Paul. Sorry, I'm just bringing up all the Hebrew and Greek stuff tonight. There's a word for lead that shows up once in the Old Testament in the Hebrew Bible, and it's used of Miriam. Just saying. Just saying. We're going to be here all night if you preach on that. And then things like Paul and Silas, right? There are all these pairings in scripture that we can talk about, but often the temptation is to move toward one voice and to see being powerful as placing power in one person.

I tend to think sharing power is formative because, and I know this is a struggle for many people, but it slows people down. Leaning into mutuality slows things down and moves you away from the tyranny of the urgent.

[25 : 00] It means you have to submit to other people. And I love this Dallas Willard. One of my favorite quotes by Dallas Willard is, hurry is the enemy of the spiritual life.

So I think you're more likely to move away from that kind of hurry when you are working in team. And then I think here, I don't know if you've noticed, but we are trying to move a bit toward structures that are about sharing power.

So we have co-directors of prayer now. We're thinking about how we can do more of that. How we can share power here. How we can pass the mic back and forth through moments like this where you get to hear different perspectives from different people.

We have a preaching team. So those are some of the ways as a community that we're thinking about this. Yeah, I'm thinking about it a few different ways. Not necessarily connected except by theme.

But one, I'm thinking about, you know, Jesus would redistribute power to the power by submitting to them. This is oftentimes Jesus would come across somebody that might be considered disabled, demon possessed.

[26 : 11] And Jesus would ask, what do you want me to do? And not in like a demeaning, like what do you want me to do? But just like, what is it that you want? Jesus puts himself underneath the authority of the afflicted person.

Jesus would share his honor in a society that's very honor-based. He would share his honor particularly with women. Particularly with those who were considered outsiders or impure or unclean for some reason.

And he would share his honor and status with those people in a way that would make Jesus look foolish and lose credibility. Which then, as a person who holds a lot of power and privilege in our particular society, I have to be asking myself, how do I give away, redistribute my power in a way that doesn't just keep putting me in charge?

And in a way that doesn't just make me look good in the process? And this is like, honest to God, I keep bringing up my therapist, I'm sorry. But something I'm working out with my therapist of like, of so many of my actions, like deep, deep, deep, deep, deep down to the root of my actions, are just so you all know, I'm one of the good ones.

And that's a twisted, twisted source of ambition. And so I've got to deal with that within myself of like, oh, I'm doing this just because I want you to like me. What if I do it because I actually believe in a God of kenosis, a God of self-emptying, and that's the God I'm meant to follow?

[27 : 38] The other thought that just sort of connected, and I'm thinking about a lot because I've got a four-year-old and a seven-year-old, and they're like handfuls in their own way. And I think so much of like child abuse, spanking, hitting, yelling at kids is this idea of like, we just don't see them.

I can sometimes struggle with seeing kids as like fully human. And so like, well, of course spanking is fine. They're not fully human yet. You've got to do what you've got to do. And I think that's a small example of what can happen at a macro level, a big level in society.

I'm like, well, it's of course fine to treat those people over there in a different way because we secretly believe they're not fully human. And I mean, damn, we've got to work on that, don't we? So, you know, look at the way you treat kids. I'm talking to myself. I'm talking to parents here. And then like think through it like, oh, are there other examples of that where I'm ready to like, you know, lay down the law because I don't fully see them in the image of God that God created them to be. Thank you. Thank you.