

**A sermon preached on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – Palm Sunday – based upon Luke 19:28-40 entitled, “What Real Power Looks Like.”**

The way Luke tells the story, Jesus was very much in control the day he entered Jerusalem. He micro-manages how his disciples will obtain the donkey upon which he will ride.

Throughout his Gospel Luke makes it clear that Jesus had a great many more followers beyond the inner circle of the twelve, and it is his followers who greet him as he rides into the city. It is specifically Jesus’ remarkable God-given power to give life that they celebrate. They’ve witnessed him deliver people from sickness, demonic spirits, physical hunger – forces that oppress and diminish life. The disciples of his inner circle have even seen him display power over the forces of nature, calming violent storms at sea.

Rejoicing in his power, they welcomed Jesus into the city as the long-awaited king come to deliver the people from their bondage to Rome and the oppression of the corrupt religious authorities. With all the Roman soldiers inside of Jerusalem, proclaiming Jesus the new “king” was dangerous, and the Pharisees try to get Jesus to silence his followers, but he won’t do it. He will not be intimidated.

He comes humbly, riding on a donkey – and yet powerful – with an innate authority no one has seen before.

His first act upon entering Jerusalem was to forcefully drive out the money changers and those selling animals in the Temple – those who are taking advantage of the poor pilgrims who’ve traveled a great distance to offer sacrifices at the Temple. It’s the closest thing to an act of violence that Jesus ever commits, though there is no mention of anyone being wounded – Jesus simply compels those profiting off the poor to shut down business for the day. Although Jesus is often pictured in this scene using a whip, only John’s Gospel describes him doing so – no such mention is in Matthew, Mark or Luke.

It was a symbolic, prophetic act Jesus performed that day in the Temple – he did not bring a permanent end to the abusive business practices taking place there. In short order, the businessmen profiting off the poor would be back to business as usual.

In the days that follow, to the dismay of the religious authorities Jesus will freely teach in the Temple.

On Thursday night it will appear that Jesus finally loses control of what is happening when is arrested. And yet it is clear that Jesus allows himself to be arrested. He knows the soldiers were coming for him and could easily have slipped away in the darkness but chose not to. When the soldiers arrived, one of Jesus’ followers initially fought back, swinging a sword that cuts off the ear of one of those who had come to arrest

Jesus, but Jesus immediately commands his follower to put down his sword. And then, for the last time in his earthly life Jesus called forth his power to heal, tenderly healing the ear of this man who was his "enemy."

In Matthew's recounting of his arrest, Jesus says, "*Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?*" implying that Jesus has supernatural power at his disposal that he could use to obliterate the soldiers, but he chooses not to use it, practicing remarkable restraint. He freely chooses to lay down his life as an act of sacrificial love for all people.

This is what real strength and power looks like. It is exercised with restraint, with the choice to put it to use – or not – done out of freedom.

Two recent news events express the confusion we human beings have regarding what real strength and power looks like. One involves a man threatening the whole world – Putin's violent invasion of the Ukraine.

The other is significantly less consequential, but emotionally evocative nonetheless and here I'm referring to Will Smith's outburst at the Oscars.

Many of us found ourselves quite disturbed by the incident. Celebrities we've held with affection for a long time can come to seem like a part of our family. In his 35 year career Will Smith had established a reputation of being one of the good guys in show business -- a likeable guy with an easy sense of humor who often played very inspiring characters.

And then on live television in a matter of twenty seconds he imploded, committing a disturbing act of violence for all the world to see. It was very much a bad thing to do, first in setting a terrible example regarding how a man should deal with insults and resolve conflicts – essentially to beat the offender into submission. And second, by damaging his public image, turning attention away from the movie and the story he had sought to promote.

We can only conjecture what compelled Will Smith to do act as he did. Surely a range of things converged in the moment to awaken longstanding wounds inside Will Smith – his own personal demons if you will that up to that moment he had largely managed to keep hidden from the public. I choose the word "compelled" in describing what Will Smith did because I do not believe his act of violence was truly an act freely taken.

Forces he wasn't fully conscious of drove him to act impulsively.

Many voices have condemned Will Smith, and though I think this particular act should be condemned, I found my reaction to be more one of "*there but for the grace of God go I.*" We all carry our own wounds around inside us that from all but the most intimate people in our lives we manage to keep hidden – our personal bondage to the power of sin. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus instructed us to pray, "*lead us not into*

*temptation,*” because if truth be told, just like Will Smith we are all capable of doing very destructive things to others and to ourselves, and none of us knows when the circumstances of our lives will conspire to lead us to act in a way that we spend the rest of our life regretting.

So, we’re left to conjecture regarding the nature of Will Smith’s inner wounds.

It seems likely that he felt pressure to show himself to the eyes of the world to be strong and powerful – to fulfill some idea of how a “real man” should act. In his autobiography, Will Smith describes how powerless he felt as a child witnessing his father physically abuse his mother, and in his rambling acceptance speech a few minutes after slapping Chris Rock, Will Smith talked about how he felt called by God to “*protect the people he loved.*”

I suspect that fear was a big part of what drove Will Smith that night. He suddenly felt that he was being presented with a test requiring him to prove his manhood – his personal power – and without time to think it through he feared failing the test, which ironically is exactly what he did – he failed the test.

Imagine another scenario: Will Smith strides with dignity up onto the stage and instead of succor punching a smaller man he calmly addresses the cruelty of Chris Rock’s joke – pointing out that his wife was not bald by choice but as the result of an emotionally distressing disease. Perhaps he could have acknowledged the possibility that Rock’s cruelty arose out of ignorance. Knowing he surely had the power to strike Rock into submission, he could have demonstrated real freedom by choosing not to give into the temptation to do so – not give into the fear the violence expressed.

The world would have been given a remarkable lesson regarding the power of speaking truth in love – something far closer to the way of Jesus. But that would have required a lot of personal insight, and more time to reflect than Will Smith felt he had. He acted not out of freedom, but out of bondage to hate and fear.

*There but for the grace of God go we.*

Vladimir Putin has far less self-awareness than Will Smith, and unlike Will Smith seems utterly incapable of acknowledging the harm he has done. The violence that Putin has unleashed on the world also arises not out of freedom but rather from a bondage Putin is loathe to acknowledge – the compulsive need to prove that he matters – that he is somebody with whom the world must reckon.

Real power, as well as perhaps real manhood comes from a state of inner freedom. It is best expressed when done so with restraint. It arises from an inner confidence that one’s life already matters.

Jesus shows us what this looks like.

So, as we enter into Holy Week, I invite you to ponder the remarkable freedom of Jesus – the extraordinary restraint with which he chooses to act.

Reflect also on the fact that those who conspire to have Jesus killed – people wielding the power to do violence – ultimately turn to violence because on some deep level they are afraid: afraid of losing their authority, losing the meaning and significance of their lives which they see as dependent upon their desperate hold on a place in the social order that places them higher than others. They don't know they, too are God's beloved children.

I invite you to come Thursday to hear the story read of Jesus' last 24 hours on earth as told by Luke – and if you can't, to read it over yourself.

If you do, you will hear how at the Last Supper -- just after Jesus tells the disciples that that very night fear will overtake them and they will all fall away – they responded by getting into an argument with one another regarding which of them was the greatest. So deeply ingrained in we human beings is this need to find significance by being superior to others.

In response to their argumeent, Jesus speaks these words to his disciples, *'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them... But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.'*

I was struck by the words of wisdom Will Smith reported Denzel Washington whispering to him in the TV break. *"The devil comes for you at your highest moment."* Right after Jesus told his disciples that true greatness comes from freely choosing the role of the servant, he turned to Simon Peter and spoke of how the devil was coming for him. Jesus says,

*"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."*

These words trigger in Peter his compulsive need to express bravado – to deny the fear rising up inside him – his willingness to die with Jesus. At which point Jesus predicts Peter's three denials of him that night.

The first step towards overcoming our fears is admitting the depths of our fear.

It's striking to me that when Jesus tells Peter that he has been praying that his faith won't fail – he already knows that that very night Peter's fear will take him hostage. He knows Peter will fail the test.

Which means that the faith Jesus is praying for Peter to have is **not** the faith to stand tall that night – no, it is the faith to humbly embrace the grace he will be offered after

he flunks the test. It's the faith to get up from the ashes and try again. And in rising anew, as one who walks in the strength of humility and not false bravado, to as Jesus said, "turn back to his brothers" in their inevitable stumblings, "to strengthen them" by showing them the same grace he will be given.

*There but for the grace of God go we.*

Because the truth is we will repeatedly fail the tests life presents us with to demonstrate what real strength and power looks like – the freedom of one who chooses the path of the servant – the way of Jesus.

In Luke's Gospel, on the cross we will hear Jesus say, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"

This is what real freedom looks like. This is what real power and strength looks like.

So, as we keep watch this week with Jesus, let us pay attention to the devil's temptations that arise as we go through our days – to be aware of that compulsive need inside us to win arguments, to see others in their worst light, to seek revenge, to withhold forgiveness, to deny our common frailty.

Let's embrace the opportunities life presents us with to practice mercy.

For such is what the world needs so badly right now.