



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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PALM SUNDAY

April 14, 2019

“Grasping at Equality with God”

(Phil. 2:5-8)

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“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though in very nature God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5-8).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of his great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

General rule of thumb: Those with power and authority like to hold on to that power and authority. They enjoy it, and are deeply reluctant to let go of it. Consider Vladimir Putin, who has changed the laws of the land to ensure he can remain the central power figure in Russia for over 20 years already. Or the Kim family of North Korea; there are no plans for open and free elections there any time soon. Also, in our own history, nearly without exception, our presidents have always sought to remain in office as long as the law allows.

To be sure, some in positions of authority genuinely want to serve people and use their talents to make a positive difference. There are many others for whom that's a convenient front to cover their true motives.

Those with power and authority are loath to give it up, and some will do just about anything to hold onto it. King Herod, Caesar Caligula, and many others have killed off family members, and autocrats today can be just as ruthless.

What's so great about it anyway? What's so great about power that people will go to extraordinary lengths to acquire it and preserve it? Is it the wealth that usually accompanies power? Is it making a name for oneself? Is it the pleasure of having servants serve you?

Now, from where does this lust for power and authority come? The Bible says it goes all the way back to Genesis 3. Remember how the serpent beguiled Adam and Eve, how he tampered with their memory? "Did God really say you must not eat of the fruit of any tree in the garden?" "You will not surely die, for God knows when you eat of the fruit of this tree, you will be like God." That sounded pretty good to Adam and Eve. They liked the idea of being like God, of having God's power for themselves and God's knowledge. Who wants to be

creature when you can be creator? Who wants to be ruled over when you can be the one who rules? They imagined the possibilities, and decided to go for it. They grasped the fruit and ate of it.

The Bible teaches this desire to be like God has been passed down intact through the generations from Father Adam and Mother Eve all the way down to you and me. We're born with it; it seems woven now into our DNA. That is, there's a part of *us* that wants to be like God. We want the omnis for ourselves. We want to be omnipotent and omniscient. Being omnipresent sounds cool too rather than moving about like snails. Being immutable (unchangeable) would be nice rather than this relentless decay of our bodies towards death. We'd rather make the rules than have them made for us. We'd rather be served than serve.

It starts early. Here's how toddlers might want to be like God. "If I want it, it's mine. If I give it to you and change my mind later, it's mine. If we are building something together, all the pieces are mine. If we are playing a game together, I make the rules."

It continues in the middle years. We'd like to have enough money that we never feel insecure, and never have to serve anyone. We'd like to make a name for ourselves at something, so that people love us, revere us, maybe even fear us a little.

It's there in our elderly years too. One of the things God never has to do is relinquish control to another. No one ever says to God, "Daddy, I've been watching the way you drive and I think it's time to give up the car keys." Or to mom, "I think it's time to sell the house and go into Assisted Living." One thing God never needs is help with personal hygiene. Wanting to be like God we fiercely resist giving up our independence or losing our dignity.

But here's the thing. Our definition of the god we want to be is very different than the God who is. For the only true God *does* give up his power and authority, his independence, even his dignity.

Listen again to the epistle. "Your attitude should be

the same as that of Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.”

I looked up the word “grasp” there in the Greek, and it means to take something by force, to steal something by making a quick grab at it. Whenever there’s a power outage in a major city, the looters seem to come out of the woodwork. They see an opportunity and grab things that don’t belong to them. It’s doing what Adam and Eve did in Genesis 3 when they grabbed at the forbidden fruit.

It’s the same Greek verb that is used in John 10 when the wolf comes and “snatches” the sheep who are without a shepherd. It’s forceful and quick and has an edge of violence to it.

In Greek it’s the same verb that is used to describe what the victors often do after the battle; they grab at the spoils of war; they take what is not theirs and cling to it as if it is.

Jesus never grasped at anything that didn’t belong to him. He didn’t even cling to that which *was* his. “Though in nature God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, snatched, plucked and then held onto with a death grip. Instead, he let go. Though equal with God, he made himself nothing. Some translate it as, he “emptied” himself, emptied himself of all those things we long to fill ourselves up with: power, authority, prestige, wealth, independence . . . he emptied himself of it and became as frail and vulnerable and humble as an infant in a manger. Do you realize what this is saying? Almighty God needed help with the personal hygiene. Almighty God needed to be fed by Mary. Almighty God needed Joseph to swift him away from Herod’s wrath, Herod’s efforts to preserve and protect his power. Instead of changing the laws to stay in power, Almighty God subjected himself to the Law. Instead of ruthlessly crushing his opponents, almighty God allowed ruthless men to crush him. The only thing Jesus took that didn’t belong to him was our sin and its wages.

We call this the humiliation of God. It's not that Jesus is becoming anything less than God. The divine nature is still all there. All the power is still his, though he refrains from using it unless it's in service of others (e.g. healing the sick, feeding the crowd, raising the dead, etc.).

In the first Gospel lesson we heard this morning, when Jesus came into Jerusalem his followers, now numbering in the thousands, hailed him as King of Israel. But Herod thought he was the king in those parts, so that got his attention. And Pilate thought he was the Roman Governor, and Caiaphas thought he was the high priest. These men all enjoy whatever power and authority they have, and they're not about to give it up. Ultimately, they come to the same conclusion: Jesus has to go. He's a threat, and the only sure way to neutralize that threat is to kill him. And for his part, Jesus allows that. Verse 8, "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Let's be careful here: It wasn't just his human nature that was crucified and put to death. His divine nature was put to death too. God died on the cross!

For us who want to be invincible, the Invincible One became a pushover. For us who want to be the Big Shot, the top dog, and the boss man . . . for us the Almighty One made himself a slave. For us who want to live in the lap of luxury, God had no place to rest his head. For us who want to be like gurus, spilling over with wisdom from on high, always able to people in their place with a few well chosen words, he became silent. For us who never want to have to serve anyone, God became our Suffering Servant. For us who want the glory and the attention, God became too shameful to even look at, having been stripped of his dignity. For us who want to be all-powerful, he became weak. For us who want to be immortal, the Immortal One died. For us who want to remain ever vigorous and strong, he breathed his last shallow, gurgled breaths. For us who never want to have to die, he suffered his corpse to have a spear run into his side to confirm and ensure his death.

[Confirmands], that's the one we/you want to follow

all your days, the one hanging dead on the cross. You don't want to know any other God than the One who was crucified for you. *You don't want any god who loves power more than he loves you.* You don't want to follow the one who lusts for power. You want to follow the One who gave it up. Not the one who will say anything to be elected, but the One who in his Word says things we don't want to hear. Not the one who will tweak the laws to serve himself, but the One who, as Paul wrote, "was born under the law to redeem those under the law" (Gal. 4:4). Not the culture, whose definition of truth is a moving target, but Jesus, who is the Truth, whose Truth doesn't change. You don't want to follow any of the other gods of the world who demand your service or else. You want to follow the One who serves you, especially in the Divine Service, where he forgives and saves you with his means of grace. You want to follow the One who lives and reigns today, not as tyrant, but as the Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. If you need a God who loves you more than he loves power, you'll find him nowhere else . . . only in Jesus.

One last thing: Remember that Greek word "grasped"? He did not count equality with God something to be grasped . . . ? We saw in John 10 how the wolf grasps at the sheep without a shepherd. But it comes up again in that same chapter, a wonderful passage. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will . . . grasp them out of my hand." No one will snatch, grab, pull, pluck them out of my hand.

By Holy Baptism, you belong to him, lock, stock and barrel; he claimed you as his own. That means you are in his hand. No one is strong enough, fast enough, clever enough to snatch you from that hand. Therefore nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It's his promise to you. "No one can snatch you out of my hand." Thanks be to God. Amen.

