**Sermon: A Great Chasm Between Us**

**Scripture: Luke 16:19-31**

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The social psychologist at UC Berkeley, Dacher Keltner, did a series of experiments where he took a group of 3 people and randomly gave one of them the power in the group as he had them work on some tedious tasks of developing basic policy for the university. At some point along the way as the people were working together they brought in a plate of cookies with a couple more cookies than there were people and, as you might imagine but unknown to the subjects, this is where the experiment really began. What they found time and time again was that the person who was given the power in the group was the one who would take the extra cookie. Through this and other studies they were conducting they were beginning to assume this would happen but what struck them even stronger in reviewing the scenarios was that the one with power not only took the extra cookie with little qualm but would invariably eat it more aggressively, leaving crumbs on their shirt and table.

This was one study among many over the years that Keltner conducted which led to his writing his influential 2016 book called “The Power Paradox”. There are surprises on both sides of the paradox. While we assume that attaining power often involves force, deception, manipulation and coercion, Keltner’s studies showed clearly that in fact attaining power whether that be on the playground or in congress is done most effectively by those who are attuned to and engaged with the needs and interests of others, not actually those with the biggest stick or the most aggressive personalities but those with the greatest social intelligence who are good and effective at reconciling conflicts, building relationships, facilitating team work, etc….

But the paradox comes in the second half of this equation and that is what Keltner’s years of study made clear was that once power is attained, people established in power are then much more likely to act selfishly, impulsively, aggressively, and they become less capable of seeing empathically… which thereby undermines the very qualities that garnered them power in the first place; cue the random person assigned power in the study group feeling free to take the extra cookie and eating it almost aggressively.

Or go back about 2000 years from Keltner’s study and listen to Jesus’ remarkable parable, where the rich man dressed in purple and fine linen, eats sumptuously everyday, and cluelessly steps over Lazarus, the poor man covered in sores suffering at his gate. The parable has been seen by many Christians as Jesus presenting the afterlife scenario that there is a hell of torment awaiting some after death and a heaven of comfort awaiting others. Fortunately for them, as the scenario goes, their status as believing Christians just *happens* to land them on the comforting heavenly side of the equation and – oomph, sorry about this – but guess which side you non-believers are on?

Fundamentalist Christians in the American religious context, those who enjoy the power and privilege of being the dominant religious group in our country, actually make a remarkable case for Keltner’s claim that power makes people less sensitive and less compassionate toward others. As power holders many Christians have few qualms about claiming that anyone who doesn’t believe like they do are not only wrong but going to an eternal punishment of agony for not believing like they do! How many devoted Texan Christians believe exactly that about the good police officer who was a Sikh shot and killed this weekend in Houston? I’d suggest a vast majority of them do, believe it or not. And there’s just something about their position of power that supports such an unreasonable and insensitive position.

But as we know Jesus’ parable is not ultimately about heaven and hell and we’ll miss the point if we get caught on that. But the parable also is not a blanket condemnation of wealth as inherently immoral and poverty as inherently moral either, otherwise the Christian mandate to help the poor rise from their poverty would make little sense cause they’d be better off in that more moral position. But looking at issues of wealth and poverty in this parable is definitely moving in the right direction, it’s just that you can’t stop there to get the full impact of Jesus’ brilliant point. You have to look at how wealth in our culture and in any culture at any time is so closely tied with power.

So what Jesus offers us here is a story that cuts quickly and surely to where social scientists are bringing us some 2000 years later in finally understanding how power works on the human psyche to make us more selfish, less sensitive and more likely to act insensitively if not abusively towards others. Apparently power blinds us to the qualities that God requires of us – compassion, mercy, selflessness, care. Read the Gospels with this in mind and be struck by who it is that Jesus rails against and condemns through his stories and actions. It is time and time again those who are insensitive and you might even say clueless in their wielding of power. The men about to stone the adulteress, the religious leaders demeaning the prostitute, the money-changers in the temple, the crowd marginalizing the bleeding woman, and so on and so forth. And who are the ones that garner Jesus affection, care and tenderness? It’s the power-less ones; the victims of the insensitively powerful. There are some instances when Jesus is responsive and affectionate to a tax collector who had a lot of power or a centurion or a Pharisee who came to him at night, but these were all people of power who, you might say, had a poverty of spirit even though they held power and that is made clear each time. They too received Jesus’ affection.

This reality take story-form in Jesus’ parable where the rich man of power is blind to even seeing Lazarus at his gate and caring anything about him. He literally does not see him. And notice that even when the rich man lands in the torment of hell and the poor man is at Abraham’s bosom in heaven, the rich man still does not get it. He is still blinded by the privilege and wealth and power he had in his lifetime. “Please,” he says “send Lazarus down to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue!” When he’s told no he tries another tack “Please send Lazarus to my family to warn them!” You see, the rich man is still unable to see Lazarus as anything but a tool to be used for his own purposes. He still doesn’t get it! Even in the stark reality of his punishment and Lazarus’ reward, he can’t open his eyes to see Lazarus as a human being, as anything but a servant to him.

“Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”, is what the British historian Lord Acton is quoted as saying. And what Keltner’s studies reveal is that people in power acting badly whether that’s the president of our country or priests in our churches or Hollywood moguls or CEO’s, whether the victims are women or children or the earth herself, what the studies reveal is that it’s not necessarily the nature of the people themselves but the nature of power that can corrupt good and decent people to be less than decent.

This should give any and all of us great pause: Me as supervisor of our Ministry Team and Lead Pastor, you as comfortably wealthy in this culture, us who hold dominant power cause of the color of our skin, you who run offices and businesses, you who teach children, we who lead religious organizations, all of us should take pause from Jesus’ parable at how easily our power and privilege can come to blind us to the needs and the plight of others.

One other study of Keltner’s that I’d like to share cause it’s a kicker. He and his students in Berkeley did a study at a street cross-walk. While one student stood at the crosswalk another hid behind a bush and marked the cars that stopped to let the person cross and those that just kept right on driving through. And what they found was unreal - zero percent of the drivers of poor cars – Yugos and Ford Fiestas and beat up cars – zero percent kept right on driving, they all stopped, while 46.2% of wealthy cars - Mercedez and Lexus, etc – kept right on driving through. In publishing this particular part of his study of power, he got more emails than probably any other study. He says one of his favorite was from a Prius driver who wrote and said “well, yes of course that’s Mercedez and Porche’s but I know that Prius drivers abide by the law!” So Keltner said he went back to his data and found that Prius drivers were actually the worst of all the cars! But again, here’s his point - he says all of my studies just showed in the end that “there’s just something about the seduction of power that makes you lose sight of ethics and other people’s interests.”

Father Abraham in Jesus’ parable tells the rich man suffering in hell when he asks for a drop of water or a warning to be sent to his brothers, he says, “between us and you a great chasm has been set in place so that those who want to go from here to you cannot nor can anyone cross over from you to us.” That could be interpreted as God having set that chasm to punish evil-doers and reward the good forever more… but more accurately, I’d suggest that the chasm should be seen as imposed by the rich man himself, corrupted by his power. The chasm between us is not something God wants or needs to do to us but is something we erect ourselves through our unconsciousness. You cannot get over here to heaven where the dignity of individuals is respected and suffering of the least is quelled and they are comforted because you cannot see it, you cannot see it and understand it any longer.

So where does that leave us? Obviously we’re not damned if we have power and privilege, pure and simple… I mean 54% of Mercedez and Porsche drivers also stopped at the cross-walk remember (Prius owners are another story)! In fact there are a myriad of examples of people with great power who wielded it with love and have done good through their power, of course… our Lord and Savior, being the clearest example, (PIANO BEGINS). Jesus is the one “who though existing in the form of God”, as the Apostle Paul put it, “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage but emptied himself taking the form of a servant and became obedient even unto death.” Philippians 2:7-8. The God of creation in human form, the greatest and highest power manifest but humbly in the presence of love.

So let us be aware of power’s potential to blind us and let us be disciplined in our circles of influence to listen and attend to everyone, even the least of those among us. Let us reflect carefully upon ourselves when we are wielding power so that we are not wounding others unaware. Let us stay close and open to the cares and sufferings and perspectives of those around us knowing how easily we can be drawn off-course to serve ourselves to the exclusion of others.

God’s love for us runs so deep and God invites us to live lives of awareness and care so that we too can be with Lazarus, in the end, held at Abraham’s side, even as we had noticed and held others over the course of our lives.

*Information above based on the following two sources:*

*Keltner, Dacher “The Power Paradox: How we Gain and Lose Influence”, Penguin Book: NY, reprint edition, 2017.*

*NPR’s Hidden Brain Podcast: “The Perils of Power”, September 6, 2016*