

Series: Finding Peace in the Purple
Sermon: Power in the Posture of Humility
Scripture: Matthew 18:1-6

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1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 He called a child, whom he put among them, 3 and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. 6 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Uwe Holmer was a German, Lutheran minister that you probably never heard of, but I think he is a great example of what it means to hold power in the posture of humility. In his youth he was a member of the Hitler youth but somewhere along the way became more interested in the strong Christian movement he saw happening around him. He was most taken with their meetings where he saw Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, and other independent Christians all worshipping together in unity. So, when he graduated high school in 1948, Holmer decided to go to seminary and become a Lutheran pastor. When his parents, concerned at the rise in authoritarianism, decided to move to West Germany, Holmer stayed in East German, declaring that they would need pastors there as well.

His first church assignment, he struggled in the pulpit and wasn't well received but eventually he immersed himself in the works of Martin Luther and came to the conclusion that he only needed to preach one topic...forgiveness...and once he did that, his whole ministry changed. People are hungry for forgiveness. It is easy to see why they wanted to hear more, because all of us want the assurance that we too can be forgiven when we miss the point, or miss the mark, but as Holmer would find out, not everyone expected forgiveness to actually be lived out. The big test came in January of 1990.

Erich Honecker was first the Secretary of Security when he took notice of the Lutheran pastor who dared to publicly criticize communism and began to harass him and his family. At that time, children could go to school until age 16, then they were trained for a vocation and went to work. For those who showed academic promise, they could apply for higher education and continue to go to school. Rev Holmer had ten kids...all of whom were smart, had high test scores...and yet every time one applied for higher education, Erich Honecker's wife, Margot, who was over the department of education, would deny them. He placed the Holmer family under surveillance and remained a threatening presence in their lives, even as he rose to power and became the leading dictator in East Germany in 1971. Yet, when communism collapsed, and the Berlin wall

fell on November 9, 1989...so did Erich Honecker. He was thrown out of his grand home into the streets, where he and his wife lived in constant fear of being attacked by the people they once ruled with cruelty and hatred. Where did they turn for help? Amazingly, the Lutheran church. Rev Holmer had to make a decision...would he only preach forgiveness...or would he live it?

In January of 1990, after talking with his family and preaching to his church that a new Germany needed to rise in grace and forgiveness rather than hatred, Rev. Holmer invited Erich and Margot Henecker to come live with him, his wife, and their ten children, all of whom still lived at home. For ten months, the Holmer family offered safety and security to the two people who had ruined theirs. Why? Because they believed in the power of forgiveness...and that translated into an incredible posture of humility and grace.

Even Jesus' most trusted disciples fell into the trap of striving to be on top...to be the big dog that everyone else answers to, the one with the power to shape their own world to their liking. "Who is the greatest in the kingdom," they asked Jesus. Who is in line to be on top? Who will get to be in charge? Jesus saw through their question. He saw that they wanted to be the one he named. "Why, you James...you are the greatest," or "Of course it's you, John...or Peter...or Matthew..." We all want that to some degree, I think. We want to be on top, we want to be the one with the answers, we want to be right and recognized as such. Maybe that is why we are so divisive right now in our society...we are too busy arguing over who is the greatest, what policies are the greatest, what nations are the greatest, to even notice the damage that we are inflicting on the kingdom. When faced with this mentality by his disciples, Jesus does something shocking...he calls to a child who is playing nearby...shocking, because children were kept in the background in their society...but Jesus calls and the child comes and Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

I had my grandchildren during the storm this weekend, and I loved watching them play and learn together. Children are just learning how to form and maintain relationships. They sometimes cross boundaries and if they are paying attention, they can see when they have hurt someone. It is in playing together that they learn to share, that they can't always have their way, that being hurtful will leave you lonely. I loved seeing how quick they were to apologize to each other, and to me, when they crossed a line.

When you think of the humility of a child, they understand the limits of power and control, because they have so little of it. They are willing to take redirection and change, because they do so much of it. They are asking questions because they know they don't know everything, and someone else might have something important to teach them.

Curiosity...I think we've heard that a time or two in the past few weeks. When we find ourselves at odds with each other, we should approach the conflict, not with haughty judgement and a demand that our opinion is the right opinion, but with curiosity, trying to learn or understand why the other's opinion is important to them.

The humility of a child allows for asking questions and seeking answers and being easy to forgive in light of the conflicts we encounter. I am always amazed at watching children play, how they can have a huge fight and then 2 minutes later be happily playing again as if nothing happened.

Unless you change and become like children...become humble like a child...

As if the warning that our haughty stubbornness is outside the bounds of God's kingdom isn't enough, Jesus says, "if any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones, just wait and see the trouble that awaits..."

Have we thought about that, folks? Have we thought what we are teaching our children about how to forgive, how to be in relationships, how to be humble, how to listen to others and be respectful? Do we think about what our children or grandchildren are learning about how to treat others when they watch our news programs or hear our favorite candidates speak?

Our rhetoric is a stumbling block to humility and harmony. How we talk about and treat one another, based on the assumption that WE are the greatest in the kingdom, sets an example for the children who stand back watching, wondering if they will be welcomed and loved and forgiven...or if they will be excluded, judged, and cast aside for having a different opinion.

I wonder how it felt for Rev. Holmer's ten children, who had been denied the education they desired, to sit at the table every night for ten months and share their hard-earned food with the two people who had denied them? How powerful it must have been to see their father's forgiveness in action.

I wonder what it felt like for the Honecker's to sit at that table and look into the eyes of the children they had denied? Humbling? I would sure hope so.

What Jesus teaches is that there is power in the posture of humility. There is power in the grace to forgive and to rise above our differences. There is power in being childlike...quick to forgive and get back to laughing together. There is power in being curious, eager to learn and understand those around us. There is power in practicing what Jesus teaches us about love and humility, about harmony over disunity, about peace over war.

There is power in grace...grace that opens the door for us to love others, as God loves us. Thanks be to God.