

## **“Who’s In Charge Here?”**

II Corinthians 6

Gordon Wiersma 6/21/09

Here’s a historical reference that will date some of us who remember it – and the rest of you who are youngsters, I hope you’ll appreciate this piece of historical trivia...in March of 1981 there was an assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan. While Reagan was undergoing treatment at a hospital for the gunshot wound, and vice-president Bush was making his way back to the White House on a plane, the then Secretary of State Alexander Haig famously declared to a national TV audience “I’m in charge here!” It was a statement that became infamous, because actually he wasn’t in charge. Secretary Haig said later that he was just trying to reassure the nation that everything was OK – but what it really sounded like was someone trying to grab power, and it just made things more confusing for everyone. The political commentators and late-night comedians got a lot of mileage out of that “I’m in charge here” statement – or misstatement.

It’s seems like there is a lot of interest in, focus on, attention to ‘who’s in charge?’ in our world, in our lives, in our history – in our church, in our faith – in our work, in our relationships...a lot of energy and importance around defining or asserting or determining or imposing ‘who is in charge’. I’m not going to focus on either the David & Goliath war story or the Jesus & Disciples storm story today – there’s plenty there to focus on next time the lectionary rolls through – but what I just want to mention about those stories is that one way to look at them could be that they are addressing the question of “who’s in charge here?” You can think about that if you spend some more time with those stories.

What I would like to do is to focus on the passage in 2nd Corinthians – I think what Paul writes to the church there has to do with that same question – “who’s in charge here?” Paul does that in a very particular context of the church there, but Paul addresses that question in a way that touches on that issue in many places in our lives – that touches on all the importance often given to defining - asserting - determining - imposing who is in charge.

The letters to the Corinthians are actually a lot about conflict – conflict within the local church community there in Corinth – conflict between Paul and the church people – conflict between leaders within the Corinthian church – conflict between the leaders and Paul’s colleagues. Shocking, right?! – that there would be conflict within a church – we have no experience with that kind of conflict in our

congregation or denomination or in the church today, right? We're plenty familiar with conflict – and I don't want to really speak against that in itself – you're always going to have differences, conflicts, to deal with in any community. But in Corinth there is a particular character to the conflict that is both disturbing and toxic – it's about 'who's in charge?' – and maybe even that in itself doesn't sound disturbing or toxic to you...but the way it plays out there is that it makes relationships to be all about loyalty or opposition, about approval or condemnation, about acceptance or exclusion, about winners and losers. It is a particular view of power that says that in order for you to have it, someone else must not. So in Corinth, it was about Paul vs. other leaders – about one group's views in the church needing to win out over another's – about whose side you were on or not. That's the kind of conflict that is not creative but destructive – not seeking reconciliation but victory – not seeking unity but control.

I think that at times Paul actually plays into that destructive dynamic – that he falls into the trap of seeking control rather than community – but at his best, which I think we heard in the verses from II Corinthians 6 today, Paul is getting at a very different approach to and answer to "who's in charge?" And perhaps the simplest way to get at it is to give the answer – the answer is God – right at the center of all that Paul says about all they have endured and all they offer as followers of Christ, Paul speaks of "the power of God". That's who's in charge...does that seem like an obvious answer – an easy answer – or worse an answer that sounds nice, but what good does it do?

Well – it depends on how we understand the power of God. It is certainly appropriate and good to see in the power of God, God's awesome creative hand - and God's grandeur and reign – and God's greatness above all things. But the particular message, truth, miracle of the Gospel – of the good news of Christ – is that the power of God is seen most fully in these things: in self-giving; in love; in redemptive suffering; in justice; in reconciliation, in faithfulness; in healing; in grace.

And then right after Paul mentions the power of God – he speaks of having the weapons of righteousness – right hand and left hand, both holding the weapons of righteousness...an interesting image...but let's connect those 2 things – the power of God and the weapons of righteousness. Now I've just been kind of trying this out, but what about this idea...what if we would see power as belonging ONLY to God - and then what our lives consist of is pointing to the power of God through our lives, that is, leading lives of righteousness – which means being about such things as self-giving, love, redemptive suffering, justice, faithfulness, healing, grace – about the things Paul talks about of holiness, kindness,

truthfulness, purity. Power belongs to God – and we point to God’s power through lives of righteousness – that is our weapon of choice in life.

“Who’s in charge?” gets asked a lot in life. People say they want to know, need to know – or that that they want to be, need to be – in charge, because it’s important to have those kinds of things be clear in life. It’s important to know who has the power so that we can be clear about how it is used – and so that the people in power can use it well and be held accountable; we need strong leaders, and if we all know who’s in charge then we can know who to follow. OK – I’m all for clarity of roles and taking responsibility and seeing authority with the potential for helping others. But I’m a pretty suspicious of it all too – seems to me people mostly want to know “who’s in charge?” so that they can find their way to grab a piece of the power as well. At least when it comes to the big questions of life – of relationships between persons – family, marriage, friends; relationships within and among peoples and nations; relationships within a faith, a church, a denomination, between religions...it seems to me that power much more often becomes a matter of who has the most of it or not – who is in control or not – who is in and out – who is secure and who is not – who wins and who doesn’t – who matters and who does not.

I didn’t realize this sermon had to do with Father’s Day until I was almost done writing it – but I think it does. For a lot of years – centuries – fatherhood was described in terms of power – of being in charge – power over your kids – over your wife – over your family. And a lot of that power was often described in religious terms – that power being derived from God – a chain of command about who’s in charge. Many men used that kind of power well, to serve their families; many men didn’t use it well at all – and hurt their families. But it is an understanding of power – of fatherhood – of relationships – of God, that is fatally flawed and ultimately not sustainable or fruitful. What if instead, being a father was defined simply by the weapons of righteousness? – pointing to the power of God by living out God’s ways with others – being a man of self-giving, love, redemptive suffering, justice, faithfulness, healing, grace – of holiness, kindness, truthfulness, purity? That is a way of being that is creative and life-giving – one of partnership to a spouse or partner; a way of nurture, structure, security for a child as a father.

And reflecting on the role of a father echoes what is at stake in so many places in life and in the church. Which is that I think we can’t handle power very well – whenever power is taken - in the name of God, in the name of truth, in the name of the people - it so often, perhaps inevitably, becomes something to grasp onto and impose on others. And so I think we are called to a different way – a

different model: what if power belongs to God alone, and we are simply given the weapons of righteousness to point to that power...? What would that look like in our relationships – in our churches – dare we say in our communities and nations? To live in righteousness – to say that is our calling, our way in all things. I believe it is a way that when entrusted to the awesome power of God can and will create true life beyond our imagining.

“Who’s in charge here?” – the answer is at the table – our Risen Lord Jesus Christ, whose power was to give his life for the life of all – may we be nourished in the righteousness in our lives that points to that power for all God’s children. AMEN.