

Texts: Mark 6:1-29

Subject: Jesus Sends the Twelve; Death of John the Baptist

Theme: Power & Light

5 Epiphany; Feb. 9, 2020, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

Who is the most powerful person you can think of? Maybe you think of the President of the United States. We have a House of Representatives and a Senate - they may seem pretty powerful. Maybe the Supreme Court. Maybe it's a news personality. Celebrities can have some kind of power or influence. In Las Vegas, Mayor Goodman has the power to convene the city council and propose city ordinances. Her words are powerful, as they get a lot of attention. Our County Commission has a great deal of power - they represent the Las Vegas Strip, and all those mega-resorts. Maybe it's the ones who own those mega resorts - they seem to be powerful. Maybe in this town it's the Convention and Visitors Authority. Who has the real power in our country? Voters? Corporations? Facebook and Apple? CEOs? I guess it depends on the issues. There are many kinds of power and it gets used in different ways.

Growing up in Florida, when a hurricane would come, we'd rely on the work of Florida Power and Light to make sure power was returned as quickly as possible after a storm. Especially for an older population, having the power working for A/C in South Florida is vital to survival. Power in scripture seems to get a bad rap - the powers and principalities of the world seem to be some kind of dark force. The Pharaohs, Kings, Roman emperors, governors, leaders of the synagogue seem to use power to keep people in bondage. Why would we want to be powerful in the first place?

If we had power, we could make people agree with us. We could convince them to follow us - by threat, or by influence. They would have to do what we told them to, or suffer the consequences. In so many ways, power is necessary for survival. If we had the power, there'd be no doubt that we'd do things the right way.

In the synagogues of the towns around Galilee, Jesus was teaching, healing, and casting out demons. His power was on full display. But in his hometown of Nazareth, he could do very little. It seems like the people there had already decided who Jesus was, and what he was all about. They knew him as the carpenter's son, the son of Mary, and they knew his siblings. They didn't seem to be anything special or different. Unlike the crowds that followed Jesus elsewhere, they were not starstruck, they weren't impressed or amazed. And he could do no deeds of power there.

In high school and college, my friends and I were in local bands. There were 4 or 5 different bands that would play shows together, hang out afterwards, date the same people, and generally just spend most of their time together. One of those guys, my friend Kevin, was just in town a few weeks ago and stayed over at my place before heading to Tucson to see his mother. Kevin went to high school with Oscar, who was the bass player for a band called the Worms. They were a lot of fun, and we'd see them around quite a bit. Oscar was in some of the theatre productions at his high school, and he moved down to Miami after graduating. He ended up at Julliard, where he studied acting. His first big film roles was as Joseph in the Nativity Story. It's a strange thing to think we knew him way back when. He was one of us. He won a Golden Globe award a few years ago, and can be seen in the latest Star Wars Trilogy. He's kind of a big deal now.

Jesus is the light of the world! But, He was no big deal to his neighbors - just a local carpenter. No one powerful, not different than anybody else. Familiarity breeds contempt (according to Chaucer, anyway). They didn't believe he was capable of much. They doubted he could do anything, and in Nazareth that was that. They had already made up their mind about who Jesus was to them, and they wouldn't be changed. It's only human. If our expectations are already set about what following Jesus will do in our lives, then that becomes our truth. It is something of a self fulfilling prophecy.

So Jesus sends his friends out into the world. They go out traveling light, two by two, not alone, but together, to call the people to turn their lives around, and they shared the good news - the kingdom is here! Jesus' power to heal and cast out demons gets transferred to them! They were the very presence of God for those who would hear them out. They went out with very little, no money, no bag, just the shirts on their backs. They would rely on the hospitality of those they would meet. Certainly some chose not to listen. Maybe they didn't want to be interrupted, or they already knew what to expect in life. They weren't looking for healing. They weren't buying it. Jesus commands his disciples to shake off their sandals - they would not even take the dust from those towns who couldn't accept this gift.

John the Baptist was pretty powerful. He had called people out of the towns and into the wilderness, to repent and be baptized, to prepare for the one who was to come. He was telling about a new kingdom. He must have been powerful, and amassed many followers. The word got around about what he was doing, and he was perceived as a threat. He might have caused the people to rise up against their leaders. This made him a target.

See, John had spoken out against the powerful Herod. He told the King that marrying his brother's wife was against the law. So, Herod had him arrested and locked up. When his daughter - her name was Salome - danced in Herod's court, he gets backed into a corner. He ends up ordering the death of John to keep his promise and to save face in front of his guests. He was a powerful ruler. He could have refused to kill John - righteous and holy as he was. Herod enjoyed listening to him preach and prophesy. He didn't have to follow through on his promise. I guess he wasn't really as powerful as he thought. John paid the ultimate price, but the truth he spoke came to light anyway.

This week, power has been in the news. Who really has power? Is power held by ones who sit as judges to defend any acts of a president as in the national interest? Is it the one who fires anyone who speaks out against him? Is it with the news, social media, or columnists, who paint a picture to sway national opinion? Or does it truly belong to the people who will decide who they will send to be their voice and representative?

What kind of power do we have? Sometimes we feel like we have none.

We can become distressed, depressed, and despondent when we are completely powerless. It's not a good feeling when we run out of options, lack agency, or have no one to help. If we cannot believe that there is help for us, one who will lend their power for our sake, or answer us when we call, we are truly alone. If our expectations are that nothing good can happen, and the powerful will always win, then that will become our truth. We get sent out like lambs among wolves. Looking like a tasty meal. We get eaten alive.

We are weak when we are alone.

But we're not alone. We don't get sent out into the world without a partner. You are in Christ, and everything that is His, belongs to you. This spiritual power is salvation, transformation, healing, peace in the midst of trouble, and the promise of eternity!

We are weak when it comes to the world, but it is a powerful to fully rely on the power that comes from God, who always provides for us. We have power through Jesus Christ and we know God's light is in us, and the good news goes with us everywhere. It is powerful to depend on God's power in Jesus, and the care of a loving community. We have power as we follow and believe the one who heals, who casts out demons, who can raise the dead to life. We are ones with a powerful word to share with anyone who is suffering or in need. We are a safe harbor against a world that only seeks power, wealth, and prestige.

As Christians, we know that real power - the power to forgive, heal, and bring life from death belongs to God, is revealed in Jesus, and even given to us through the Holy Spirit. As ones who carry that good news to others, we have power - to be light in the darkness, to cast out fear, and to share the heart of Christ. The real power we wield is knowing that the love of God in Jesus has freed us from despair, from our own failings, and our selfishness. That power is engaged and put to use in acts service to our neighbors, in listening to the needs of those around us, in speaking on the behalf of people in need, in caring for the world God loves. We are powerful because we are not beholden to the powers of the world. We are powerful when love is the root of all our actions and the response to the injustice of the world. We are strong when we are weak. We are powerful when we believe in Jesus' presence with us and God's grace given to us through the cross. Amen.