



Why, Church? (Are You So Hungry for Power?)

Luke 4:1-13

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On Wednesday of last week, a day known in our Church calendar as *Ash Wednesday*, we began the season of Lent – a 40-day season that leads up to the celebration of Easter. For those who weren't able to be present on Wednesday, a brief introduction into our worship focus for this season of Lent will be helpful to frame this morning's message around Jesus' fasting in the wilderness.

You've heard me say before that, among all that I do as a pastor, one of the things I find myself doing more often than I would like is having to defend (or apologize on behalf of) the church. I meet a lot of community members (who have no connection to the church) who have a story to tell about how the church has – in some way, shape, or form – harmed them. There are people who have been abused by the church – mentally, physically, spiritually, and sexually abused by leaders and pastors in the church. As these conversations endure, I find myself wondering – as much as I hear them asking – “Why, Church?” Why, Church?

Now, there are times when this question is a welcome question. There are times when I'm meeting with a new family to the area, and they want to know, Why Church? Why Washington Street? Why the United Methodist Church? Why Christianity? When these questions are asked, the question, “Why Church?” has but one punctuation mark – the question mark at the end. The question mark indicates some interest and curiosity. Answering this question, Why Church?, when only one punctuation mark is present is fun. These are life-giving conversations.

But, when I'm meeting with people who have been hurt by the church, the question mark is not the only punctuation in the question. When these challenging stories are being named, the question that is presented has two punctuation marks. Along with the question mark at the end, there is a comma in the middle. Why, [comma] Church? Whyyyy, Church? The comma adds so much to the curiosity, and it invites much more reflection before we respond.

The comma, at the core of this question, invites a pause for reflection.

Lent is a lot like the comma – it invites a pause for reflection. It invites us to look deeper into the brokenness of the world, the brokenness of the church, and our own brokenness to acknowledge where we need healing so that we might be prepared to receive the grace God has given us in Jesus Christ.

This morning, using the story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness, we're going to ask the question: Why, Church, are we so hungry for power?

In the days following Jesus' resurrection, the early church was given its formation through the gifting of the Holy Spirit. The Church grew rapidly, welcoming new members from a growing and expansive base around the Mediterranean Sea. At first, the church grew by welcoming Jewish Converts – and then it expanded to the Gentiles (non-Jews beyond the region of Judea).

As the Church expanded and proclaimed a power that came from *the* God of heaven and earth, and as the disciples of Christ performed miracles that displayed such a divine power, Christians were seen as a threat to the power of Rome. Christianity was decreed by the Emperor to be a crime worthy of capital punishment. Jesus was just the first of many who had their life ended by the Roman Empire for their profession of faith and their witness to God's glory.

After almost 300 years of persecution, the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to the Christian Faith, and through the Edict of Milan, he lifted the ban on Christianity. Following this legal allowance for people to practice Christianity, Constantine noticed that there were many different beliefs among Christians. Unsurprisingly, over the past 300 years, in the secret of house churches and persecuted spaces, the Christian faith had been co-mingled with the polytheistic pagan religions that were rampant across the Roman Empire. Constantine saw a need to unify the Christian experience across the Roman Empire, and so he – the Roman Emperor – the most powerful man in the world – called for the Council at Nicaea to codify the tenants of the Christian faith.ⁱ Coming out of the Council of Nicaea, we have the Nicene Creed – an affirmation of faith that is still used in the church today.

About 50 years later, under Emperor Theodosius, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire.ⁱⁱ Now an official religion of the state, the Roman Empire used its state-sanctioned capital punishment to kill someone whose crime was being a Christian “heretic.” In a just a 100-year period, the Roman Empire went from persecuting all Christians, to claiming Christianity as the religion of the state, to killing those whose understanding of Christianity varied from the state's.

While the Catholic Church offers a history of the Papacy – the office of the Pope – dating back to Peter, who received his title having been called by Jesus “the rock of the Church,” the power of the Pope really comes into being in the years following Constantine. As the Catholic Church became the state religion of Rome, the Roman Emperor wanted to centralize the power of the church in Rome. So, while there were bishops spread throughout the Roman Empire to offer governance over the church, it was the Emperor's authority that helped give the bishop of Rome the power of the Pope we know today. For the first 1000 years of the Catholic Church's existence, the Pope was selected – at least in part – by Imperial leadership. It wasn't until 1059 – over 1000 years after the birth of the church – that the Pope began to be elected only by a vote of the Catholic Church's highest leaders – the Cardinals.

As the Church spread outside of Rome, we continue to see imperial leadership offering oversight to the church. In the 16th Century, the Parliament of England passed the “Acts of Supremacy,” which made the English Monarch the head of the Church of England. This was an attempt by King Henry VIII to become the “Supreme Head of the Church,” seeking to usurp the power of the Pope.

I know you didn't expect to get a history lesson this morning ... so I'll pause there. But assuredly, I could go on – there are many more examples in the history of the church where the empire and the Church's leadership are grossly intertwined.

For as much as people bemoan the presence of Christianity (or any religion) being intertwined in the political climate today, our history shows that the Church has long been in cahoots with political leadership.

From a political perspective, it makes sense that the empire would want to have ownership of the religious community. The early church had shown that they had great power – a power that seemed to defy the empire's. Even though Christianity was legally persecuted, a decision the Emperor had made to quell this uprising of faithful converts, the community of faith had still grown exponentially. The number of people who turned from polytheistic, Greek and Roman god-worship, to this monotheistic Christian faith out of Judea was a threat to the empire's power. Since they couldn't well defeat what they couldn't see – namely, the God of Israel – the Roman Empire did the next best thing, they took over the faith. They ensured the Christian faith was under empirical oversight.

The state wanted the power of the church.

And lest we deceive ourselves, this is not simply an issue of the past. For as much as we here in the United States demand separation of Church and State, there is little debate that politicians today still use the church for their own political gain. There's hardly a candidate that runs for office – from the local mayor's office to the president's office – that doesn't drop one-liners in political ads to prey upon the vote of those who define themselves as Christian. We have political leaders all over the world who rise to power “by means of religious fanaticism, [and] exploiting and exacerbating the prejudices of people.”ⁱⁱⁱ

From Roman Emperors to British Monarchs to America Presidents, from an imperial perspective, the power of the church has always been an entity to be managed for political gain – not for the gain of the church, but for the gain of the empire. It makes sense why the empire would want the power of the church within their hands.

But what about the converse? Why would the church want the power of the empire?

At first glance, I get it. After having been persecuted for 300 years by the Romans, the empire is now saying, “you are free to profess publicly.” And, not only can you profess publicly, but we want to give you an office in Rome. The leaders of the church must have thought that their day had finally arrived. We're going to have the voice of the Emperor on our side. The church went from meeting in house churches in secret to having the wealth of the empire behind them so that they could build monuments to the faith, such as the Archbasilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome – which, at 1700 years old, remains one of the oldest Christian churches today.

So yes, I get it. I get why the early church welcomed the empire's power as much as I get why we grasp at political power still today.

And yet, as much as I get it, as much as I do understand our embrace and welcoming the opportunity to sit at the tables of Emperors, we have to offer pause. We have to be intentional in adding in the comma to ask, “Why, Church?”

In the days after Jesus was baptized, in those days after the Spirit descended upon Jesus in the River Jordan and God cried out, "This is my Son, with whom I'm well pleased," Jesus was driven out into the wilderness. For forty days he fasted while under the temptation of the devil – of Satan.

While weak from hunger, Satan offered three temptations to Jesus. First, Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread so that he might have sustenance to satiate his hunger. Jesus refused, quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, saying, "One does not live by bread alone." Though Jesus does not finish the scripture, the rest of the text in Deuteronomy continues, "One does not live by bread alone, but by the very word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

The third temptation is for Jesus to prove his divinity. Theologian Justo Gonzalez offers, "The devil seems to be saying: "I don't believe that you are the Son of God. In fact, I don't think you are too sure either. So prove it to me and to yourself by jumping off the pinnacle of the temple and having angels come to protect you." In this third temptation, Jesus again responds with scripture, this time quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

For those keeping track, yes, I skipped the second temptation on purpose.

The second temptation is one fraught with challenges. The text reads: "The devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'"

There are many a faithful Christian who try to pick a fight with this text based on the promise of the devil that the authority of the kingdoms of the world belongs to the evil one, *not* to God. How can Satan claim to have authority over the kingdoms of the world? Is not all that is in the world created by and in the hands of God?

One need not look further than the news today to see just how evil the kingdoms of the world are. We have the Czar of Russia carrying out genocide on the Ukrainian people. We have Israeli occupation continuing to take more land from the Palestinians. We have Syrian Refugees who are still living in tented camps, waiting from some nation to be willing to accept them under asylum. And lest we think our own nation is exempt from the control of the evil one, we continue to see more and more legislation passed that divides our country by race and economic status, and that has used family separation policies to discourage immigration (among many other issues). "When Luke and the other evangelists claim that the devil has the power to grant all the kingdoms on earth, they are simply acknowledging what we can see by simply reading the newspapers."^{iv}

Jesus, in this moment of temptation, has to decide, from whom will Jesus receive his power? The evil one is offering Jesus the power over all of the kingdoms of the world, if Jesus will just bow down and worship them.

But Jesus says, again quoting from Deuteronomy, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

See, Jesus knows what he's being offered. Jesus knows he has to choose between two powers – one, the power of the devil ... and the other, the power of God. Jesus knows that in this choice, he can't have both. How do we know Jesus knows this? Because Jesus will teach this. In Matthew 6, Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters." Jesus knows he has a choice to make, and he knows there is only one right choice.

The Lord is Our God; the Lord alone.

And watch this – this is why we can't just read scripture in small snippets. The scripture is an all-inclusive story of teaching. In this moment, Jesus will reject the invitation of the devil to accept the devil's power. Jesus is, in this moment, making a strong statement that the power of God is stronger than the power of Satan. And then, time and time again as the story continues, Jesus will *prove* that God's power is greater than Satan's. In Matthew 8, the Gerasene Demoniac is possessed by a legion of the devil that acknowledges Jesus' authority, and Jesus casts the demons out. In Luke 11, Jesus casts out a demon known as Beelzebul – the ruler of demons. In Luke 4, Jesus doesn't just cast out demons, he silences them, rebuking them and refusing to let them speak.

Jesus doesn't just refuse the devil's temptation to accept evil's authority over the kingdoms; conversely, he will spend a good deal of his ministry casting evil out and liberating people from the very power the devil has offered to give him.

And so, we have to ask, "Why, Church?" Take the pause the comma offers, and spend some time in reflection. Why do we not trust that God's power is enough? Why do we think we are better off entrenched with the kingdoms of the world? Why do we ignore Jesus' leading and, where he denies the invitation of the devil, we say, "yes, oh evil one, may I have another?"

The church has too long been wed to the powers of political empires. It's time we reclaim God's invitation. It's time we ask, "Why, Church, are we so hungry for the powers of the world?"

Because listen and watch, Jesus proclaims, we already have all the power we need. We already have the power to overcome the empires of the world. We already have a power that is greater than any Emperor, Queen, or President. We already have a power great enough to cast out the evil one. We are endowed with the power of the Spirit that gifts us new life, that grants us strength to endure, and that proclaims that as the Body of Christ, we are fully capable of being God's witness to love and life in this world. Yes, indeed my friends, as the Church, we stand on the side of the one who does not bring death, but whose power overcomes death. We do not need the powers of the empires, for we have the power of God. Let us claim the gift of God to the Church, and live as God's empowered disciples to proclaim and witness to *God's* power in the world. Amen? Amen.

ⁱ "History of the Church." <http://gotquestions.org>. Retrieved March 4, 2022.

ⁱⁱ "History of the Catholic Church." <http://wikipedia.org>. Retrieved March 4, 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Justo Gonzalez. *Luke: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

^{iv} Gonzalez.