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**Palm Sunday**

**April 13, 2014**

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## **“Grasping At Equality With God”**

*(Philippians 2:5-8)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:5-8)*

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

General rule of thumb: Those with power and authority usually like to hold on to that power and authority. They enjoy it, and are reluctant to let go of it. Consider Vladimir Putin. He has been vacillating between Prime Minister and President of Russia since 1999. He has changed laws to make that possible, and is clearly intent on staying in power. But it's not just unique to him. Consider the presidents of the United States, the vast majority of which always seek a second term in office.

Those with power and authority are loath to give it up, and some will do just about anything to hold onto it. Those ancient kings and emperors come to mind, King Herod, Caesar Caligula, and many others who killed off family members to protect their authority. They can be just as ruthless today: Muammar Gaddafi, Robert Mugabe, Hugo Chavez, Kim Jong Il.

What's so great about power and authority? What's so great about it that people will go to extreme lengths to acquire it and preserve it? Is it the wealth that comes with power and authority? Is it to be the center of attention? Is it the pleasure of ordering others around?

To be sure, some in positions of power genuinely want to serve their people. They want to use their God-given talents to make a positive difference. But there are others for whom it's not about serving. It's about being served.

Downton Abbey is a popular T.V. series produced by the BBC. And maybe one of the reasons we enjoy it is because we can imagine what it would be like to have a big staff of

servants at your beck and call. Just say the word, ring a little bell, and people come running. Truth be told, we'd all enjoy that, wouldn't we? "You there, snap to! Fetch my horse, and another of those little pastries while you're at it!"

Now let's dig a little deeper. From where does this lust for power and authority come? Doesn't it go all the way back to and find its origin in Genesis 3? The sin of Adam and Eve is they wanted to be like God. They wanted God's power and authority for themselves and they were willing even to try to snatch it from him in an act of open rebellion.

The Bible teaches this lust for power has been passed down through the generations intact . . . from our first parents Adam and Eve all the way down to you and me. We call it inherited or original sin. It's the stuff we're born with, the sin and rebellion that seems almost to be woven into our DNA.

So I submit there's a part of us all that wants to be like God. We want to be immortal. You want to be invincible, not subject to accident or evil. Truth be told you want to make the rules and not have them made for you. And who of us wouldn't rather be served than serve?

It starts early on. Here's how toddlers want to be like God. Here's how they think. "If I want it, it's mine. If I give it to you and change my mind later, it's mine. If I can take it away from you, it's mine. If we are building something together, all the pieces are mine."

Older children also want to be like God. In our confirmation class tomorrow, this one is known as the science whiz, that one is physically strong, this one is the artist. Those identities feel good to our 8<sup>th</sup> graders because they bring them a little closer to being like God, the One who is king of the sciences, and omnipotent and creative. But then they/you move on to the high school, where no one knows them/you or what your good at, and they don't give you the kind of respect you're accustomed to. You've lost what position you have, and it feels like a set-back, like you're starting over, having to prove yourself again and rebuild your reputation.

As parents we know how it works. As our teens grow more independent, and no longer wish to be under our authority anymore, we might push back, because we don't want to lose that power and authority. We might tighten our grip . . . and hover.

And what of the elderly? There's a part of you that also wants to be like God. One of the things God never needs is help from someone else. One of the things no one ever says to God is, "Pops, it's time to give up the car keys." Or, "it's time to decide who's going to have durable power of attorney for you." God never has to be moved into a nursing home so that others can wash his bottom. We all want to be like God so we fiercely resist losing our independence.

We all want to be like God, so we grab at power when we can and we cling to it for all our worth, with all the tenacity of a Central American autocrat well past his prime.

But here's the thing. Our definition of the god we want to be is very different from the God who is. For the only true God *does* give up his power and authority. The only true God *is* more interested in serving than in being served.

Listen again to the epistle. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant."

I looked up the word "grasped" there in the Greek, and it means to take something by force, to steal it firmly, quickly. When there's a blackout in LA looters seem to come out of the woodwork. They see an opportunity and make a quick grab for something that doesn't belong to them. Isn't that what happened in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve grasped at the forbidden fruit? They grasped at being like God. They tried to take by force what did not belong to them.

It's the same Greek verb that is used in John 10 when the wolf comes and "snatches" the sheep who are without a shepherd. Do you have a visual of what that verb looks like?

It's forceful and quick.

In Greek it's the same verb that is used to describe what the victors often do after the battle; they plunder and grab at whatever booty they can find. It has the connotation of taking possession of something that does not belong to you and then holding on tight as if it does.

And that's precisely what Jesus did not do. He did not grasp at anything that was not his. And he did not even cling to that which *was* his. "Though in nature God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, snatched, plucked and then held onto tightly. Instead, he let go of the power. Though equal with God, he made himself nothing. Some translate it as, he "emptied" himself. He emptied himself of all those things we long to fill ourselves up with: power, authority, prestige, wealth, independence . . . he let go of it all and became as frail and vulnerable and humble as an infant in a manger. Do you realize what this is saying? Almighty God allowed himself to be rolled over to have his bottom washed. Almighty God allowed himself to become utterly dependent on Mary for her milk, and Joseph, to swift him away from Herod's wrath, Herod's attempt to preserve and protect his power. Instead of changing the laws like Putin, Almighty God subjected himself to the Law. Instead of ruthlessly crushing his opponents, almighty God subjected himself to the wrath and ruthlessness of his opponents.

When he came into Jerusalem his followers, now in the thousands, hailed him as King of Israel. But if you thought you were the king in those parts, as Herod did, that gets your attention. And if you thought you were the governor as Pilate did, and if you thought you were the High Priest of Israel, as Caiaphas did, that gets your attention. These men all enjoy their power and authority are not going to let some itinerant preacher from Galilee ruin everything. And so ultimately they come to the consensus that Jesus has to go. He is a threat, and the only sure-fire way to neutralize him as a threat is to kill him. And so those with power and authority make it happen, and Jesus, God's Son, allows it to happen. Almighty God allows evil people to do evil things

to him. Our text says, “He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

God did that for us, for us who want to be like God. God did that for us who lust for power and authority just like our first parents Adam and Eve. For us who want to be immortal, God died. For us who want to be invincible, God emptied himself and became defenseless. For us who want to be the Big Shot, God made himself nothing. For us who want immeasurable wealth, God became poor. For us who want the glory and the attention, God became humble, easy to ignore. For us who never want to have to serve anyone, God became our Suffering Servant. On the cross he who was strong became weak. He who is our Mighty Fortress became defenseless, exposed, splayed out, vulnerable to the elements, to the spittle, to the gawking of those passing by, to the sharp end of a spear. God’s Son became vulnerable even to death, so that you and I might live eternally.

2 Cor. 8:9 says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

[Confirmands], that’s the one you want to follow all your days. Not the one who lusts for power, but the One who gave it up. Not the one who will say anything to be elected, but the One who said things that were and remain unpopular. Not the one who wants to be served, but the One who wishes to serve you and forgive you and save you. Not the one who will tweak the laws to serve himself, but the One who, as Paul wrote, “was born under the law to redeem those under the law” (Gal. 4:4). You want to follow the One who lives and reigns today, not as tyrant, but as your loving Father. You want to follow the One who loves you more than power.

One last thing. Remember that Greek word “grasped”? He did not count equality with God something to be grasped . . . ? We saw in John 10 how the wolf grasps at the sheep without a shepherd. But it comes up again in that same chapter, a wonderful passage. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them

eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will . . . grasp them out of my hand.” No one will grasp, snatch or pluck them out of my hand.

By Holy Baptism, you belong to him; he claimed you as his own. That means you are in his hand. And now his power comes back into play. There is no one strong enough to snatch you from that hand. On the cross he did not protect himself, but he will protect you from sin, eternal death and the devil. Therefore nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It’s his promise to you. “No one can snatch you out of my hand.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

