

Matthew 23: 1-13, Mark 12: 38a, Mark 9: 30-37

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Be Aware of the dance of power

Become slaves to love

1. Jesus is pretty upset!

We find him in this state of mind and heart in our reading for this week in Matthew 23: 1-13. And he becomes most woe-fully upset as the chapter continues.

And Jesus shares his “wild” self with the crowds and his disciples. It’s about the scribes and Pharisees, Jewish leaders. He uses really strong language to describe their dominant power-over in all areas of social, cultural, religious and political. He laments that the positions and roles that they hold in this ancient society are not based on or expressed in an shared-equal-power approach.

“They sit on Moses’ seat”, Jesus says. This means they hold the highest authority, and their power was absolute. It affected every aspect of that society, biopower, all-of-life power: Yes, Moses presented the people with the commandments. But he also, with others, created hundreds of other guidelines for every aspect of religious, social, cultural and political life; including the way power was to be shared. Jesus shares with his listeners that the scribes and Pharisees take advantage of “sitting on Moses seat”, and continue to create more guidelines based on their views.

There is anger in Jesus words, when he says that these guidelines are “heavy burdens, hard to bear”; what frustrated Jesus is that these leaders “lay these burdens on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger” to address these burdens.

Before this event, Jesus witnessed these burdens and strict rules and he supported people and challenged the burdensome rules; that he saw starvation, land being taken, demands for rituals that were impossible for poor people to fulfil. No wonder his heart was deeply troubled. And even more that, with good leadership this poverty and hardship could be prevented.

Jesus further observes that they contradict the teaching of Moses by “not practising what they teach”.

Jesus suggests that having gained significant power, control and respect from society, these leaders abuse this trust. “Beware of them”, Jesus says in Mark’s version.

Jesus looks even deeper into their desires and motivations: “They do all their deeds to be seen; ... They love to have places of honour at special events ... “They desire to be the greatest”. To be honoured in ancient societies was one of the most valued experiences. Love is not the motive, their own needy self is.

2. We need to pause here and realise that Jesus is not saying that these ancient Jewish leaders are the only ones who use their power for themselves, who desire to be the greatest and who desire to be seen and highly valued. Such an incorrect view has allowed some Christians to be anti-Jewish throughout history.

What Jesus is doing is sharing his critical observations of the inadequate use of power by these particular leaders, and sharing examples of the burdensome effects of such use of power on the whole of society. And this happens in all societies! And it happened with the followers of Jesus during his ministry.

In Mark 9: 33-37, Jesus overhears his followers arguing about which of them was the greatest. In that context, as in this story in Matthew 23, Jesus informed them that “whoever desires to be first must be last of all, and servant of all”.

3. I suggest that Matthew’s Jesus shared these observations and assessments to encourage us to “be aware of the dance of power” within ourselves and our own contexts. To make us look, see, and think! And to “think against our thinking” – that is, to question ourselves as a spiritual exercise: what would Jesus say about my use of power and position? Really look deeply at our “self”. Jesus is challenging us to be aware of the what makes us play for power, in our own self, in our families, organisations and communities.

As William Loader writes:

People bent on power surround themselves with the trappings of power, which are often designed to reinforce their claim. What we wear, where we sit, how we are greeted – these are elements of the persona we want people to see and respect. Behind it is often a frail yearning for love which has been met by such compensatory strategies. Abuse of others is frequently the result of exploiting others to meet our own stifled needs.

I like his term, “frail yearnings for love”, the way we do things, set things up to gain power. We are invited to uncover these self-serving ways and to learn about our inner yearnings and desires; to have enough courage to see and accept our contradictions; and to really live in the midst of life and taking the risk to share power equally.

4. Jesus calls all who wish to follow him to live in an alternative way: “whoever desires to be first must be last of all, and servant of all”.

I suggest that this means being a *slave to love* – taking over Bryan Ferry’s song, “Slave to love”, 1985. Not using his romantic meaning but to live love as relationship and collaboration, shared-equal-power-with. An impossible possibility, I know!!!! It is such a radical way of being that it requires a courageous decision to “be born again” into it.

And the term “servant”: Jesus often takes a term that people in his society can relate to; there were servants, slaves, everywhere; so Jesus says, hey, be a slave to love, and turns the whole idea of servanthood upside down. Servanthood has often been abused and misunderstood. That is why “love” is the master, not another person to whom we betray our lives; for Matthew, Jesus is about love of God and love of neighbour. Remember last week, Jesus taught, no one is to be called Teacher, for you only have one Teacher, Jesus. Power is about serving love, about love as relationship and collaboration, shared-equal-power-with, which is our vision and mission in Parramatta Mission.

5. What could this journey be for us today, that Jesus is inviting us to take, which I am calling *Be Aware of the dance of power, Become slaves to love?*

I would like to share an example from “power in family dynamics” which I found liberating for my family life a few years ago.

Harriet Lerner in her book, *The Dance of Intimacy*, shares a story about how Jo-Anne and Hank changed their dance of power, and became slaves to love so that neither of them was a master and the other a servant.

When they first married, they shared power equally. What does shared power mean in a relationship? Harriet Lerner writes that each of us is a person, a “self”, with ideas, values and behaviours, which our family and culture have influenced. When we value the other person, as a “self”, and allow them to be different, this gives them more freedom, to express more of their “self”, which means sharing power of self. Each has an equal, strong “self”.

As time passed, Hank became honest enough to share that he was annoyed that Jo-Anne was reading a women's magazine because he believed it was changing her personality and making her do less for him. So Hank told her to stop reading this magazine. She accepted.

So he took more power and control, and so grew more "self": his ideas and values took control. But his wife then felt less equal and less valued, and grew unhappy. This affected both of them. In family systems language, "she has 'given up' part of her "self" and he has 'borrowed self'. But when Jo-Anne worked hard to grow into a greater self-hood, then Hank felt he had less power and control and became depressed.

Through the support of Harriet Lerner as a Family Systems therapist, they bravely observed what was happening in their relationship; how they were dancing with power in dealing with their "self" and with the other's "self".

As both looked into their past families, they discovered that they were influenced by the cultures of their parents. Jo-Anne learnt that her life, and her "self" – values, ideas, behaviour - was part of a larger history: that the women in the generations of her family did not express differences with their partners; they did what their husbands wanted, and denied their own interests. Hank learnt the he belonged to his own family systems tradition where the male took more power.

They were both sacrificing and losing self. Lerner points out that this marital dance is actually encouraged by our culture and held in place by social, cultural and economic arrangements. And when anxiety is high, our relationships become out of balance, with one partner doing too much and the other doing too little. Change does produce turmoil and anxiety. And Margaret Mead reminds us, "the disruption caused by change can only be resolved by more change", and so on. Without change, we live unequal lives, losing our freedom to grow into transformed lives, where the Spirit seeks to lead us.

Real equality in each of our lives requires a reflective, courageous and spiritual journey of growth and transformation. We are called to learn to to live love as relationship and collaboration, shared-equal-power-with, to be a slave to love, and love of your "self" is golden.

Conclusion (if you really want to do more work on your "self")

Harriet Lerner writes that,

We move up on the selfhood scale (and the intimacy scale...) when we are able to:

- present a balanced picture of both our strengths and our vulnerabilities.
- make clear statements of our beliefs, values and priorities, and then keep our behaviour congruent with these.
- stay emotionally connected to significant others even when things get pretty intense.
- address difficult and painful issues and take a position on matters important to us.
- state our differences and allow others to do the same.