

The Powers of the Ring: Dominion
Jeremiah 34: 1, 7-11; 2 Corinthians 3: 17-18
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I Introduction

As *The Lord of the Rings* begins, the wizard, Gandalf, who is one of the main characters in the series, tells the hobbit, Frodo, to throw this ring that he has inherited from his uncle, Bilbo, into the fire. And Frodo does that, and they let it sit in the embers for a few minutes and then take the ring out of the fire with a pair of pokers. It's completely cool but as they sit there, they noticed a ring of fiery letters start to take shape around the edges of this ring. And those words say, "One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them."

Gandalf expected those words to appear, but it was the last test that he had to make to be absolutely positive that this ring that Bilbo had found so many years ago is in fact the One Ring forged by the Dark Lord Sauron to dominate life in Middle-earth. Frodo didn't know what he had there, but his ownership of the ring sets in motion a cycle that is the story of *The Lord of the Rings* as the free peoples of Middle-earth seek to destroy this weapon, and Sauron, the Dark Lord, seeks to re-acquire it.

Now, if this happens to be your first service of the year here at Metropolitan and you're wondering why I'm talking about *The Lord of the Rings*, it's because every January here at Metropolitan, we take the month to do a sermon series that's a little bit more invitational to people who might not be regular churchgoers. If you're regular Metropolitan folks and you have friends who don't have a church home but may be a *Lord of the Rings* fans, this is a good way to invite people to explore what church is like.

And for many people, it's an opportunity for them to realize that maybe church isn't quite as scary as it seems from the outside, right? We want this to be a place where people can get excited about engaging.

So, *The Lord of the Rings* is a great way to do that because there's so much theological meat in *The Lord of the Rings*. J.R.R. Tolkien, who was himself a very devout Roman Catholic, was also very explicit in saying that *The Lord of the Rings* was a very Christian work. But he also brought some intentionality to stripping away from *The Lord of the Rings*, a lot of the overt, explicit Christian symbolism, to provide enough freedom for people to explore the work as a work of literature, and discover some of the theology in that process. And that's what we're doing over the course of this January.

Now, two weeks ago I started talking about the ring itself and the temptations that that ring of power offered the people who owned it. We talked about the temptation to invisibility. We talked about the temptation to longevity because it extends the life of the wearer. But today, we come to kind of the crux of the matter, which is the ultimate purpose of the great One Ring, which was to dominate and coerce life across the face of Middle-earth.

II. Domination is the greatest evil because it flies in the face of who we are, and the subject is a complex one. The deeper I got into writing this sermon, the more layers it felt like I was unwrapping.

Now, for Tolkien, this quest for domination, for dominion, is one of the greatest evils because it flies so profoundly in the face of who we are as creatures of God.

Tolkien understood freedom to be the most fundamental element of who we are as created beings, that God gave us free will as the first gift to us in Eden, and our attempts to limit other people's free will are the ways in which we stand in direct conflict with who God calls us to be.

Tolkien understood very profoundly, as does the Apostle Paul in today's letter, that the choices that we make as creatures of free will are what shape us as children of God. That it is our choices that make us who we are and lead us along the path of salvation. And so, to deprive someone of the ability to choose is to deprive them of the ability to respond to God's grace.

Paul says that very clearly in this passage from Corinthians today when he says, "Now, the Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces," he says, "seeing the glory of God as though reflected in the mirror are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

So, for Tolkien, the epic battle of human existence is this conflict between our call to freedom and our desire to dominate. Tolkien, of course, lived through two World Wars. He fought in World War I; his son, Christopher, was a pilot in World War II and he very much understood those conflicts to be about the people who valued freedom, standing in opposition to those who would dominate.

III. We see both pieces of that in our passage from Jeremiah this morning.

He also, though, recognized that that's also not just a geopolitical battle. It's also a battle that takes place inside each of us on an ongoing basis. And this wonderful

passage from the prophet Jeremiah explores both of those and their relationship. Because this story takes place at a point when Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had actually already captured Jerusalem and had conquered, spread the power of the Babylonian Empire all across the face of the Near East. And in the face of that dominion, the King Zedekiah rebels against Nebuchadnezzar.

Now, it was a futile attempt because the state of Judah was such a small piece of the Babylonian Empire, it was a complete mismatch. But Zedekiah and some of the people around him start this rebellion, and Nebuchadnezzar brings the army back over from Babylon to Jerusalem and besieges Jerusalem. And in the midst of that besiegement, Zedekiah and the rulers of Jerusalem decide to release all of the slaves, all of the Jews that had been held in captivity within their own community. And they appealed to the rules of Deuteronomy that demanded the release of Jewish slaves after they had served a certain period of time of indentured servanthood. So, Zedekiah thinks this is a great time to do that. They released all the slaves, they add new warriors to their ranks, and the morale of the whole community rises.

And then, in kind of an interesting historical hiccup, the pharaoh of Egypt had brought his army up north to oppose Babylon and support Jerusalem, and so Nebuchadnezzar broke his besiegement of Jerusalem and took his army over to fight against pharaoh. So, once Jerusalem was free of the immediate threat of captivity, sadly, Zedekiah and all the leadership decided, "Oh, well, that freedom thing that we just gave to all the slaves? We're taking that back now." And they do. And Jeremiah, the prophet, is outraged that the people who are fighting for their own freedom on the one hand would turn around and choose to enslave other people at the same time. And

he calls Zedekiah to the irony of that situation and threatens him that if you're going to strip away the freedom of your brothers and sisters, you can pretty much expect that God is going to strip away your freedom as well. And in fact, of course, Nebuchadnezzar destroys the Egyptian army, comes back to Jerusalem, destroys Jerusalem, and then carries off the leadership of Judah into captivity shortly thereafter.

That paradox of being passionate about our own freedom while at the same time desiring to control the freedom of the people around us is an ongoing struggle that most of us experience on some level if we're in any way self-aware, right?

The story is also a wonderful example of that in that our desire to control the people around us is fiercest when we feel as though our life is lacking control. When we find ourselves in places that we don't have the ability to express our own freedom, one of the natural ways that works itself out is our trying to dominate the people around us in our places of work, in our families, in our churches.

Many of you know one of my favorite books was written by a rabbi and pastoral counselor by the name of Ed Friedman called *A Failure of Nerve*. But Rabbi Friedman's first book which is kind of a standard text for seminaries is a book called *Generation to Generation*, in which he talks about how people who have limited control over their own lives often find church to be the place that they try to express their control.

I've had conversations with folks here in our church when we're wrestling with some issue or another, and I had one conversation recently where somebody said, "You know, I've seen that happen in work and I couldn't control it there, but by gosh, it's not going to happen in our church."

Well, what Jeremiah reminds Zedekiah and us is that the desire to dominate is a pretty slippery slope, and we can't fight for our own ability to be free at the same time that we limit somebody else's ability to be free as well. So that in a very powerful image of Zedekiah being carried off to captivity in Babylon, our desire to dominate and control always leads to our loss of our own freedom. That there's a cycle that happens on the great workings of the cosmos that mean that as we seek to extend our own power and control and domination, on a very profound level we lose our own ability to express our freedom.

IV. Tolkien's message is that we can only be most fully who we are when we encourage and support the freedom and creativity of those around us.

Tolkien's message here is that we can only be most fully who we are when we encourage this freedom and creativity of the people around us. It is the destiny of beings with free will that we must make choices, and those choices are what lead us along the path towards salvation and relationship with God and with one another. So that when we limit another person's choice, we deprive them of the ability to continue their walk towards God.

We see this very powerfully throughout *The Lord of the Rings* in a number of different places, but one of the places that we see this regularly is through the character Gandalf who is the wizard of the story. And Gandalf is one of the most wise and powerful characters in the entire set of novels, and one of the most powerful characters in Middle-earth. But over and over again in the story, you see Gandalf stepping back from doing what needs to be done and allowing the people around him who are less

wise and less powerful to make the choices for good. Because Gandalf realizes you can't coerce the right outcome to a situation; the coercion itself undermines and sullies the outcome, so that a good outcome only happens when people choose freely for that outcome. Over and over again, you find all of the powerful characters in *The Lord of the Rings* have the opportunity to take that One Great Ring to defeat Sauron, and each of them chooses against that, knowing that to defeat Sauron through domination is to have lost the battle ultimately.

The path to salvation relates to our moral choices, not to physical or material victory. And if salvation is truly the highest and most important end, it will avail nothing if characters like Gandalf do the work for them. In other words, the choice, every character's choice, to do good on some level is as important as the result of that labor. So that the call there, the call from Jeremiah, the call from St. Paul, the call from Tolkien, is to figure out those places where we are insisting so much on our own way that we cease to let the people around us choose for themselves a healthy way to respond. But that's hard, because sometimes the people around us make such poor decisions, right? You know who I'm talking about, right?! And part of our call to live with freedom and power is a call to let people make poor decisions sometimes. To give them the freedom and to become the people who God has created them to be, not who we think God has created them to be.

That's, of course, the central paradox of parenting isn't it? This journey in which we allow the people that we love the most to do things that we know are ultimately going to be harmful for them. And yet, our call is to give our children the freedom to

make some of those poor decisions, knowing that's the only way that they have to become the people who God has created them to be.

V. Which is where the whole issue of boundary setting engages the call to freedom.

Which is where this whole confusing issue around boundary setting emerges, both with children and with other adults, and engages this paradox of our relationship between grace and law, between freedom and domination, that is so much at the heart of St. Paul's writings. And I apologize with even raising this in this context, but part of the struggle with this sermon was as you start getting into questions of power and domination and start peeling back the onion, there's just more and more stuff that's under there. But St. Paul writes throughout his letters about this contrast between law and grace, between having to do certain things, between obeying a set of commandments and the freedom and grace that God gives us to respond. And St. Paul wants us to not hold those two in opposition, but somehow they work together in that the law provides us, not with a bunch of rules that we need to slavishly obey, but with the model of what healthy community living is about that invites us to respond with freedom and grace within the context of the caring community.

What I mean by that is, a child's call for, "It's mine, it's mine, it's mine," "I'm going to do it my way, my way, my way, my way," is on some level a call to, a desire for freedom. But also understand, particularly with children, that those choices don't often facilitate their freedom. To give a child whatever a child wants is, of course, to destroy a child, right? To develop behavior patterns that are destructive and addictive. So that

part of the paradox of law and grace is understanding the value of the structure of law that God has given us, but then to celebrate the freedom and grace within the structure.

We were talking about this at Bible study this week, and the image that resonated the most with me as we were talking is of a jazz musician who understands the rules of music so profoundly that they can transcend those rules as they express their own creativity and energy in engaging and creating music. There's this wonderful interplay of freedom and structure that gives jazz its magic. And that's the model that St. Paul holds up for us, that we have this gift of the law that is not about being slavishly obeying, but it's about providing the structure for healthy life and community.

VI. Conclusion

Frodo ultimately volunteers to take the One Ring into the heart of the enemy's land in Mordor to destroy it. And he volunteers saying, "I will take the ring, though I do not know the way." And the council of free people that has gathered around to make this decision offers him companions along the journey, the *Fellowship of the Ring*. And as the fellowship leaves, Elrond, the Elf Lord who had called the council together says to each of them, "No oath or bond is laid on you to go further than you will. For you do not know yet the strength of your hearts, and you cannot foresee what each may meet upon the road."

Freedom, Tolkien wants to suggest, resides in freely choosing to be part of a community with one another, to work for the up-building of that community, with passion and energy and joy, and allowing others at the same time to do the same, and trusting that in the midst of all of that joyous chaos, that the Holy Spirit works itself out.

Amen.