

Sunday, August 22, 2021: Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Being Powerful “
Ephesians 6:10-20

Power is not a word that reticent church folk use very much. “Timid” may be an indicator of our current state of mind in the church. This is strange because there’s a verse in I Corinthians: “For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on **power.**” Jesus called his work, “**deeds of power.**” We have the idea that power must be related to the bad stuff. This is a mistake. There’s nothing to indicate in the story of Jesus that he was without power or that he disdained power. He only rejected the political power of this world.[\[1\]](#)

Jesus certainly rejects the secular political power. Remember how he turned down the devil’s weapons of fame, fortune, and worldly power in the temptation. Do we not know that this is the church’s temptation? We are always tempted to imitate the politics of the world. Secular power abuses. Secular power corrupts. Secular power is arrogant and condescending. Secular power puts its foot on the necks of the weak. I am not asking for that kind of power in the church. That is devil power.

Look, there’s power and there’s power. But it is about power. The power of Christians is different from the power of the world, and I am afraid that we have lost confidence in our true power. There’s something not quite right in many Protestant churches. There’s a lot of secular politics. What’s missing? The prophetic realism of the Hebrew prophets. Where would you find such preaching? Mostly in African American churches. In addition, we need to add the deep history of Socratic questioning and Aristotle’s rhetoric if we are to have a chance against the powers and the principalities. I don’t mean for this to sound self-justifying because I am a student of African American preaching and rhetoric, but I am sure that I have learned to preach because I have studied the black prophetic tradition and Aristotle’s rhetoric.

The voice of the prophets, heard mostly in churches who read an Old Testament lesson weekly, needs to return to the center of our message. The deadly charge of idolatry is the worship of power, money, patriotism,

and the condemnation of it sits at the center of prophetic preaching. The gold-calf of wealth and the blood-soaked flag have no place with the Bible and the cross. These idols have been the calling cards of empires from Rome to the USA (See Cornell West, *Democracy Matters*).

Paul describes our enemies in cosmic terms: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Let’s upgrade the identification of our enemies. The church is now caught in a world-wide struggle for dominance by 3 dogmas that are all anti-democratic and anti-Christian in every way. Free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism. “The major culprit here is not ‘political correctness,’ a term coined by those who trivialize the scars of others and minimize the suffering of victims while highlighting their own wounds. Rather the challenge is mustering the courage to scrutinize all forms of dogmatic policing of dialogue and to shatter all authoritarian strategies of silencing voices. We must respect the scars and wounds of each one of us – even if we are sometimes wrong (or right!)” (West, *Democracy Matters*, 7). “How ironic that in America we have moved so quickly from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Let Freedom Ring!” to “Bling! Bling!” – as if freedom were reducible to simply having material toys, as dictated by one of our major enemies – free-market fundamentalism.

While Christians fight one another, the secular invasion of imperialism, nationalism, patriotism, prejudice, nativism, wealth, and entertainment march across the nation destroying and sacking our churches. When I started my ministry in 1962, I had the wild-eyed illusion that the church would save the world. In 2021, I am now operating behind enemy lines in a guerrilla campaign to keep churches from being closed and turned into microbreweries. When we most need confidence and fierceness, we are insecure and timid. Sitting around sipping lattes and saying sweet things like “It is up to each of us to do the best we can by loving one another” is not a weapon against a secular beast-king. “Who am I to judge another Christian? After all, when it is all said and done we are all sinners” is not going to save us. Paul has no use for this kind of talk. He thinks it is time, to borrow some Willie Nelson lyrics, “You got to saddle up your horses, you got to draw a hard line.” Paul thinks we face the enemy with truth not guns; righteousness not rigid beliefs; the gospel of peace not the bombs of war; the shield of faith not the flag; the helmet of salvation not the secular power

of our culture; the sword of the Spirit and not the politics of the day. Paul thinks we are up to our necks in alligators, and we have to engage the swamp enemies with a fierce response.

Our lack of confidence in the power that we have keeps company with our skepticism about the weapons Jesus has provided us. Remember that David only had a slingshot and 3 round stones. The historians of I Kings thought it important to give a full description of the armor and weapons of Goliath: "He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him." Now, do you get it? We don't think the armor of Jesus stacks up well, do we? I think we have trouble believing that being kind, gracious, gentle, and turning the other cheek are weapons in the cosmic warfare. We hesitate at "love wins." Why is this so? The secular culture knows it as Star Wars makes so clear. And if you have read Harry Potter, Voldemort has all this power but cannot defeat love. The church doesn't need every Christian to be fierce and tough or to take on the task of publicly confronting the enemy, but we do need everyone acting like Jesus in the face of the secular onslaught. Every meal we serve is a bomb exploding into the secular culture of greed and "What's mine is mine." Every act of kindness is a weapon against the haters, the hell-raisers, the mean-spirited. Every refusal to get revenge is a victory against the people who only live to get even.

What in the world can we do? Realize that we have real power. If we have put on the whole armor of God, we are prepared for conflict. Christians go forth into the cosmos armed with Jesus and his power: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the meek, the peacemakers. Blessed are those whose power depends on telling the truth, living with integrity, seeking righteousness, making peace, proclaiming the word, and praying.

Most importantly, we should know that as we engage in the struggle – the life-and-death struggle that involves the universe – we need some powerful people on our side. We have to get back to the business of producing women and men of power, capable of taking on the beast-kings of this planet. With the Philistines at the door, with the mega-giants, the new

Goliaths at the door, who will say, “I will fight the Philistine”? Linger here with young David for a moment: “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts.”

New Luther’s have to step forward: “Here I stand.” New Wesley’s have to appear preaching the gospel in every nook and cranny. New Calvin’s have to be produced. The church has to find a way to produce another Walter Rauschenbusch – the great New York prophet of the social gospel. We named a seminary for him; now we must put his vision to work.

Give me a Dietrich Bonhoeffer willing to be hung rather than give in to the power of Hitler. Give me Jimmy Carter building houses. Give me Clarence Jordan starting an interracial commune in the heart of Georgia during segregation. The Catholic Church has to produce more people like Dorothy Day and her Hospitality House in New York. The ABC and the UCC need to provide the atmosphere for the calling of passionate activists like William Sloan Coffin, another famous New York preacher, peace advocate, and a preacher who was determined to end the nuclear arms build-up.

With Christians raising hell about historians teaching people about the Tulsa race war, do you know they have also tried to remove Frederick Douglas and the great Supreme Court jurist Thurgood Marshall from the history textbooks? They would hide from our grandchildren the antislavery protestor David Walker and his famous 1829 *Appeal*. And the deeply religious Ida B. Wells-Barnett, antilynching activist. Baptist Benjamin Hayes, president of Morehouse College, inspirer of Martin Luther King, Jr. And the towering African American theologian Howard Thurman. The church has to provide our children examples of the faithful, the righteous, the holy not just the famous, the rich, the professional athlete.

There’s a war and we are losing. I’m not being melo-dramatic, but plain and honest. There’s a war, a cosmic war and the beast-kings, the corporate giants, the money gods are winning. We are called to be conquerors not cowards.

The irony: We have all the power in the world that we need. God has given us all the time we need to discover that Christ will never forsake us, never leave us, now let us down. Churches will fail you; preachers will fail you. So what? Don’t let that dry up your faith? Jesus will never fail you. The good news is that we have been given all we need in order not to be defeated by

the powers and the principalities. Now, sit there and soak it all in: You are powerful. You are powerful. You are powerful. We are part of God's drama of salvation. We give up fear and anger and join in the cosmic power and joy that God has made possible for us. Here, those who would rule through fear and violence come to ruin. We are joined in communion with all God's saints who by God's grace have learned to rejoice in the beauty of a cosmos conformed to God's rule. This is our power. There's power, power, power in the name of the resurrected Jesus, king of kings and lord of lords.

[1] A biblical prelude to Jesus and secular/religious politics: Religion is always tempted to imitate the politics of the secular world. All the political parties in Jesus' day were obsessed with having secular, political power. The Pharisees had power out in the small villages and synagogues. They were the rural party with religious power. Rules were the weapons of the Pharisees. Thousands and thousands of rules about every aspect of daily life. The Sadducees had power in Jerusalem and in the Temple. They were the urban elites – the rich and the powerful. In league with these Temple power brokers were the Herodians. They had an alliance with Rome and together with the Sadducees they controlled the economy, the daily life of the people. These are the religious leaders who stole the property of widows. Outside the main political parties there were the Zealots – a nationalistic, heavily-armed group of men who wanted war with Rome. They were the patriotic party, the conspiracy party. Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and Zealots.

Jesus didn't think much of the collected power of Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and Zealots. In Matthew 22, the 3 most powerful parties became allies to get rid of Jesus. The powers congregated. They ganged up on Jesus. The Pharisees and the Herodians plotted to entrap Jesus, but they left him and went away. The Sadducees then took their shot with a convoluted argument about whose wife a woman would be in the resurrection after having 7 husbands. The Sadducees, remember, didn't even believe in the resurrection. Jesus silenced them with these words: "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the **power** of God" (Matthew 22:29). That should have been the end of it, but the Pharisees regrouped and launched a counterattack, but again Jesus left them befuddled by quoting their own Scripture to them: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it:

'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."