

Date: January 29, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 4

SERMON: Power and Freedom

Text(s): 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

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The other morning, I was working out on the treadmill, and turned on CNN's morning talk show. Some fashion guru or other was on there talking about how men and women dress differently if they want to project an image of power. For men, it's still the red tie and dark suit. For women, as it usually is, things are a bit more complicated. As an example, they showed photos of Condoleeza Rice, our secretary of state, in various outfits she wore on her recent European trip— outfits that projected both power and femininity.

I remember that it was back in the 80's that the word "power" underwent an extreme makeover. Prior to that, it was mainly used as a noun. There was electrical power, political power, staying power, the power of the purse, and so on. But back in the 80's people (mostly people in New York or California) suddenly began having power lunches or wearing power ties or went to their health clubs for power workouts.

In fact, although the American Heritage Dictionary still lists sixteen separate definitions for "power" used as a noun, and only four in which it is used as an adjective, even the dictionary bears witness to the total makeover this word went through. For in addition to noting that it can be an adjective, the dictionary now also contains a multitude of separate entries for all the new ways in which power functions as an adjective: there's power trip, power dive, power brake, power drill, power takeoff, and more. Down at Hannaford's you'll be able to find power drinks that will give you energy and power bars to munch on when you run out of steam at work. Somehow, when I see the commercials for those power bars on TV, I have a hard time believing that I'm ever going to have the body those people trying to get me to buy power bars have. It's going to take a lot more than power

bars.

Power is still one of the hot words in our cultural vocabulary these days. People do power workouts, or go on power walks, lose weight with a power diet, play power video games, or even practice the latest fad, power yoga, which sounds like an oxymoron to me.

It only takes a moment of thought to notice that most of these uses of the word power appear positive. Power, it appears, is a desirable thing to have. People eat power lunches, or at least some people do, presumably because doing so will enhance their position or expand their influence in some fashion. Virtually all of the commercials on television for pickup trucks or SUV's feature the power the vehicle has to take us places we've never gone before. Somehow, the power of the vehicle is supposed to translate into personal power, although the commercials never quite tell us how that transformation is supposed to happen or what it will do for us when it does.

But it doesn't take much thought to realize that power is also very often negative and destructive. It's almost a truism now that when sexual harassment occurs in the workplace between men and women, it's not so much about sex itself, but about the power dynamics involved between the harasser and the harassed. In fact, in any group dynamics, including those within churches, power is often a basic motivator which produces tensions and frictions within the group. Who is in control? How is that control going to be exercised? It's no accident that so many of the struggles within families or organizations center around money, because money represents power. It's also why issues involving money are so often surrounded by secrecy, because secrecy provides the atmosphere in which the real issue, power, can operate.

We know about this kind of power ourselves. Everyone of us has had the experience at some point of being over-powered by forces beyond our control, whether it was the school bully who terrorized us on the playground at

school, or a violent assault by a family member or the humiliation inflicted by a cruel boss at work or the more subtle, but no less destructive manipulative games that people play in committee meetings or in families or in school or in the workplace. Destructive power takes many, many forms, and all of us have experienced at least some of them. We all know what it feels like to be in the grip of powers beyond our control.

If power can be so destructive, then why do we consider it so desirable? Or to put it another way, how can we distinguish between power that is good and power that corrupts? That we need to distinguish between constructive and destructive power is obvious, for there is no relationship, whether between two individuals or in a group or organization in which the dynamics of power are not a primary factor.

We get some help in distinguishing between power that corrupts or destroys and power that liberates or energizes in our Gospel lesson, where St. Mark tells us the story of Jesus' healing of a man possessed by evil spirits. Those inclined toward the modern scientific world-view of life may feel more comfortable talking about this man's problem in modern psychological terms. One might say, for instance, that he was a paranoid schizophrenic or afflicted with multiple personality disorder, though whether those terms have any more real meaning than talk about demons is another question that we won't get into today.

The point is that this man was a victim of some kind of malign power; the source of that power doesn't ultimately make a difference in the point of the story. He's a man in pain, in torment. And we can identify with him in that experience. He has been overpowered and his dis-ease isolates him from the normal company of other human beings. He is terrorized and oppressed and alienated, both from himself and from others.

In the presence of Jesus, he suddenly cries out, "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth. Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*" Jesus, however, does not respond the way we might at first expect him to. After all, this possessed and troubled man has just hailed him as the Messiah, the Son of God. But rather than acknowledging the truth of this revelation, Jesus orders him to be silent, and then commands the evil spirits to release him. And the man immediately goes into convulsions, cries out, and then suddenly is normal, in his right mind, whole and free from the torment of his affliction.

The response of the onlookers is astonishment and awe. And they keep asking one another, "*What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.*"

We see both the negative and the positive aspects of power at work in this story. There is the destructive, *over*-powering power of the man's inner demons. We've learned enough about the phenomenon we call insanity or mental illness to know that sometimes alien voices speak through the mouth of the deranged person. And these voices are never voices that build the person up, that promote wholeness and well-being and health. They are always voices that speak in anger, in hatred, in obscenities, and their effect on the person is always disintegration.

But there is another kind of power that we see in this story. It's the power that Jesus exercises when confronted by this man. It's a power that is both greater and of a different order than the power that has terrorized and victimized the man. The demon's power enslaves the man; Jesus' power liberates him. Why? What is the difference?

Mark's answer is that Jesus' power is not the power of brute force, but the authoritative power of love or compassion. The word authority is a key word in this gospel. Jesus'

teaching is described as being “*with authority, not as that of the scribes.*” Jesus’ healing of this overpowered man is described as “*a new teaching—with authority! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.*”

The power which has overpowered the man is demonic because it produces disintegration of personhood. Jesus’ power, on the other hand, is authoritative power because it brings integration and wholeness and freedom to the man who is oppressed. Jesus does not exercise power to achieve his own ends. He uses power to transform another’s bondage into freedom. And that’s the real difference between power that is destructive power that liberates.

The same is true in our relationships. Power is always part of the dynamics of our relationships with other people. In fact, the very word dynamics comes from the Greek word for power, the same root from which we derive the word dynamite. And it’s no great leap to see that the dynamics of power are the potential dynamite in a relationship between marriage partners or between parents and children, or between employers and employees, or and governments and citizens. If in any of these relationships the power exercised is “power over” someone, then the power will corrupt the one wielding it and become destructive. If the power exercised is “power for,” or “power on behalf of,” or “empowerment of,” then it is power that has divine authority behind it, and it will bring healing and wholeness and freedom.

In Anne Lamotte’s wonderful novel, *Little Crooked Heart*, her main character is a thirteen and a half year-old girl named Rosie. Rosie is a very good tennis player who is on her way up in the junior tennis league. Like most young teens, she’s lacking in self-esteem, and her experience of the devastating loss of her father in a car crash has left her with a lot of insecurities— insecurities which are not helped by the fact that her best friend and partner has already blossomed into

voluptuous young womanhood, while she’s still only on the verge of puberty.

There’s another character who turns up religiously to watch the junior tennis matches. He’s a homeless man named Luther, and everyone is a bit frightened of him; he’s not very clean and his clothes are a bit ragged, and he watches these youngsters with a fierce concentration when they’re playing a match, and so the parents all suspect that he could be a pedophile or some other sort of pervert, though he never does anything to cause such a suspicion. He never even speaks to any of the kids.

One summer, during a very close match, Rosie is behind, and when her opponent hits a ball that lands just on the edge of the line, and she clearly knows that it’s a good shot, she calls it out instead. And even though she gets away with it, she notices that Luther is watching her, and sees in his eyes that he knows she cheated. She cheats several more times that summer to get herself out of a difficult spot in her matches, and each time she knows Luther knows too. And for some strange reason, this knowledge that someone else knows she’s cheated is comforting at the same time as it’s disturbing. It gives her a sense of identity; she’s a cheater. That’s who she is. And Luther’s knowing confirms that.

In a very moving scene, Rosie meets Luther by accident one day in the bus station, and she overcomes her natural suspicions enough to speak to him. In their conversation, she asks him about his life, and he tells her that he was once an up-and-coming tennis player, and that he did what she did— he cheated, and someone else noticed. At first, Rosie can barely breathe; her secret is out in the open. Luther not only knows who she is— a dirty little cheater— but he’s going to squeal on her.

But Luther is a man who has learned how to use the power of knowledge and words to lift someone up instead of putting them down. He tells Rosie that she’s not a cheater, a bad and

unworthy person. She's simply a person who cheated. Like everybody occasionally does. Having cheated doesn't make her a bad person. It just makes her a fallible person like all of us are.

And that knowledge suddenly breaks in on Rosie's inner self-loathing like a bright ray of sunshine. She's not a cheater; she's a person who cheated. And suddenly she knows she has the inner courage to face up to what she did rather than continue to hide it and let it overpower her with feelings of shame and self-loathing until she actually becomes what she did. Luther's words have set her free. She goes home and confesses to her mother, and the two of them go to the tennis league managers and Rosie comes clean about what she did, and accepts responsibility, and in so doing makes a long stride toward emotional maturity and adulthood. And all because a homeless man understood how to use his power—the power of knowledge of Rosie's actions to liberate her from her own self-loathing and guilt.

We will always have to decide how to use the power that we have in our relationships with others. But we can learn from Christ how to relate to one another so that we EMpower rather than OVERpower one another. This is what we should be about in church if we are about anything— learning how to use the authoritative power of love to lift one another up, to bind up one another's hurts, to strengthen one another's weaknesses. If we learn to use power in that way, then the world around us will sit up and take notice and exclaim, "What is this? A new teaching— with authority!" And those outside will seek to come and be among us because they will recognize in the authority of our lives the possibility of their own freedom.