

Gary Harder, May 11, 2014

“Being Church – Holding the gift of power in trembling hands”

Texts: Luke 22:24-27; Luke 24: 44-53; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Introduction: I read the story “The Sun and the Wind” as the children’s story.

Being Church – Holding the gift of power in trembling hands. One of the really important themes we need to address when talking about being church, is that of power and authority. We have already spent two adult Sunday school classes exploring it. And yet it is a very difficult and treacherous theme to preach about. It makes me a bit uncomfortable. I, because of my age, my experience, my education, my position as interim pastor, have quite a lot of authority and power, sometimes more than I am comfortable with. I don’t always know when I am using my power in healthy ways – ways that empower the church and lead to healing – or when I am just using my power to fill ego needs and selfish needs. When is it that I am harnessing the power of the sun – both the “s u n” sun and the Son of God son, and when am I relying on the power of a blustery wind just to get my way?

The story of the church, almost from its beginning, gives us some pause. Mostly, especially since Constantine in the 4th century, the church has sided with the wind, and has in fact often been a raging hurricane, forcing its will, often in brutal ways, on its people and on the world. The Mennonite church too has sometimes been more in league with the wind than with the Son that it preaches.

On this Mother’s Day, as we each reflect on our own mothers, or on being a mother, and as we celebrate the gift of a mother’s powerful love , perhaps we can be reminded again that power based on loving can change the world in a way that no howling wind ever can.

The Bible talks a great deal about power – both abusive power and healing power. Jesus talks a great deal about authority and power. Mostly he challenges and confronts those who have official power – the scribes and Pharisees and other leaders - for the way they were abusing their power and authority, and empowers and encourages those who feel powerless and marginalized. So there are lots of texts to choose from. I have chosen three texts which I hope will help us, both as a church and as individuals, reflect on how we use our power.

1) Luke 22:24-27

The disciples of Jesus are gathered with him in what is known as the “Last Supper”. Jesus has just broken the bread and shared the cup and told them that the moment has arrived when he will be crucified. It is an intimate and solemn and spiritually charged evening.

And what happens at the end of it? “A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest”. Can you imagine, that holy moment and suddenly they are arguing with each other about who is the greatest, who should be boss, who deserves first place, the place of honour, in their little community. So human. So much so that I suspect we can all identify with those disciples.

Jesus responds, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority are called benefactors (called benefactors, tongue and cheek, I think, for they are of course mostly anything but). But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves... I am among you as one who serves.” What an upside down, counter cultural perspective on power and authority.

2) Our second text is from Luke 24:44-53

Shortly after the resurrection Jesus appears to these same disciples – the same ones who were arguing about which of them was the greatest. He explains the Scriptures to them, and reminds them of what has just happened. “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”.

Jesus promises his followers that they will be clothed with power from on high. These friends, who continually have visions of greatness and of being big bosses filling their dreams, are still promised that they will receive power from on high to be God’s witnesses.

I want you to notice the gift which Jesus gave his followers in farewell. The gift was the promise of power from on high. The gift was not the power, but the promise of power. And the promise was enough. Maybe I quibble too much on a fine point – the promise is not yet the power. But I think the distinction is important. Bear with me.

The disciples will continue their work and their witness with a rather profound sense of personal weakness and even of fear. But they will be sustained by the promise of power when they most need it. And that will be enough. That will be enough for them to risk their lives going back to Jerusalem. That will be enough for them to go back to the temple – there where the crucifixion of Jesus was engineered – to tell the Jesus story and to worship God with great joy.

The promise of power has to be enough. For you see, if we claim always to have that power from on high, available to us at our beck and call, we will be uncontrollably tempted to build our own empires with it, to strive always to be the greatest. When we do

what we do, especially working for the church, and we claim that God is always on our side, that we are always right, and that we act only in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are already abusing God's Spirit, and surely also abusing other people. That, unfortunately, has been the record of the church through the ages – forcing its will on others in the name of Jesus.

We are promised power from on high – when God wills it; when we particularly need it. We are given power. Power and authority are positive words, not negative words. But they so easily become self-serving. We are given power to “witness”, to serve others, to make a healing impact on our world, This power, when it comes, comes like surprising grace from God. But it can never be captured or controlled by us – as individuals or as a church.

The story of Pentecost – which we leave for another Sunday – is the story of how this promise from Jesus was fulfilled. The power of the Holy Spirit was poured out on a whole gathered community. And it was poured out on everyone, not only on the leaders.

3) 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

But now I want to turn to a third text. The church has been born. The power of God has been unleashed. Wonderful things have happened. And almost immediately that power is abused. The church, after all, is still very human, and all followers of Jesus, after all, are still very, very human.

Paul helps found a church in Corinth. It is founded with so much hope and joy and faith. And in no time at all those followers of Jesus are fighting with each other. They are making claims about who is the greatest of their leaders. Sound familiar?

Writes Paul, “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided?”

In other words, the Christians in the church in Corinth were forming into factions following different leaders, building little empires. Power was being abused. (later in the letter we hear about other major conflicts, about “worship wars” between the charismatics and the rationalists, about class conflicts between rich and poor that comes out at communion, and other issues. We Christians are still always very, very human).

Power and authority at MFM

What will help us here at MFM receive the gift of power that Jesus promises, and to use it positively for building the church and building God's kingdom, and empowering each person in the community to grow and use their gifts and find their voice? The thing

with power is that it is both so necessary and so dangerous. Like electrical power. By now we have learned to put many safeguards in place so that we can use electrical power in positive ways and avoid the destructive accidents – which still do happen from time to time. I think we may find it more difficult to put the same kinds of safeguards into place for our use of personal power and even of God’s power.

One of the very important conversations we began in our adult Sunday school time a few weeks ago while exploring what we still need here at MFM in order to embrace the future with hope, was “How do we hear and respect every voice in the congregation”. We had more discussion on this topic in further committee meetings. How do we hear and respect every voice?

On the one hand we affirm that every voice is important to hear and that “we are all equal”. On one level this is of course profoundly true. In the eyes of God, and hopefully in the eyes of every person here, we are all equal – equal in worth, equal in value, equal in being loved, equal in being given the name of a beloved child of God.

But on the other hand our voices do not have equal strength. That is a myth. Our age, our gender, our marital status, our experience, our background, our length of time in the congregation, our education, our personalities, our skin colour, our ability to articulate, our language skills, all play a factor in how strong our voice is and how it will be heard – or not heard.

I am so aware of my “white power”, my “white privilege” when I connect in with First Nations people – which I have been privileged to do especially because of our adoption of a native child. As much as I attempt to be primarily a listener, a friend, an advocate, and even a participant in their ceremonies, they often feel silenced and reticent because of my white power. They have a long history which makes them very cautious and suspicious of white do-gooders and their power. They have experienced the white church and white government as mostly a destroying hurricane wind. They will not easily see me coming only with the power of God’s love in the name of God’s Son.

So how do we embrace and value and use authority and power given by God in the church? How do we listen to and respect every voice when some voices are much quieter and some voices are much louder?

I have become more aware over the years, both in myself and in the congregations that I have served as pastor, that so often the hinge which determines whether authority and power are used wisely or selfishly, is how we feel about ourselves – that is, around our sense of self-worth.

When we feel inadequate and struggle with a healthy sense of self-worth we are inclined to do one of two things, neither of which build community.

- 1) We may withdraw our voice and become silent for fear of rejection. We do not risk naming what is important to us. We give in. But that tends to make us feel angry and resentful and inadequate. We don’t feel strong enough inside to risk being disagreed with. But then we are also denying the power that has been given us. Then we are not hearing

God saying to us, “I have called you by name. You are my beloved. I have given you the power to witness to my love.”

- 2) The other extreme growing out of an inadequate or unhealthy sense of self-worth is to over-compensate by becoming louder and more insistent, demanding that others listen to us and agree with us. We feel we have to get our way or else our self-worth is further deflated. We may put others down. We become more and more critical, especially of leaders. We fight until we win every argument – or at least till the other stops talking.

A healthy self-worth (knowing that we are loved – by God and by others), on the other hand, lets us relax, and be more self-confident, and lets us stand up to over-loud voices without needing to put them down. It takes away our need to be so aggressive in getting our way.

It helps me to keep reaffirming that my value, my self-worth comes from being loved, not from my accomplishments and capabilities. God names me “beloved”, a child of God, valued – and gives me, along with everyone else, power and gifts to be used to witness to God’s love and to help build a community of God’s people. Even so, I hold my authority and power in trembling hands, knowing how easy it is for me to misuse this gift.

I had immense personal struggles with how to use my authority and power during our conflicts in TUMC over the issue of homosexuality and especially over what to do with my associate pastor who one day named herself a lesbian who had fallen in love with another woman. Our congregation had to struggle with both issues, and make decisions about what to do. Do I use my pastoral power to ensure that what I was convinced was the way forward would prevail? Probably I could have stilled some voices and possibly changed the outcome of the vote – which in the end was to release my associate – which I was deeply unhappy with. But I was committed to listen to and respect every voice, wasn’t I, even those I totally disagreed with? Some people were very unhappy with me for not coming down hard on one side - or the other - though I did voice my convictions. The amazing thing is – and I think it is a thing of pure grace – as much as we hurt each other in the battle, and despite the fact that in the end my vote lost out, TUMC is today a stronger and healthier and more welcoming church than it was then.

In the end that has helped me relax a bit – to be less anxious about – many things in the church. I don’t get quite so uptight anymore about conflict in the church. I am a bit more relaxed when leadership doesn’t emerge – like now at FMF when we don’t have a congregational chair or a full slate of elders. God is still at work empowering the church, empowering leaders, giving gifts to every member of the body, promising us the gift of Holy Spirit power when we most need it.)

That Holy Spirit power will come like the warm shining of the sun after a cold winter.

Conclusion

The three Biblical texts which we have looked at are, I think, always at play in the Church. In Luke 22, even in the context of a shared meal and deep fellowship, suddenly the disciples are arguing about needing power to satisfy their own ego needs. In Luke 24 Jesus gives authority and power to these same disciples in order that they can witness to this Jesus and help to build God's church and God's Kingdom. But soon comes Romans I with its story of church leaders and followers dividing into factions, choosing sides, claiming superiority, putting down others.

So what about us? We too are very human followers of this Jesus who promises us power from on high. And we too, like the disciples in Luke 22 and like the Christians in Rome, will always be tempted to live out their stories rather than God's story. We do hold power and authority in trembling hands.

Can we commit ourselves to use our power to create a safe place for conversation and engagement, especially when we disagree with each other? Can we commit ourselves to affirming, and giving value and dignity to every person in our community? Can we use what power we do have, and we all have plenty of it, to empower each other, to empower especially those voices which are softer and often not heard? One of our biggest dangers is to deny the power that we do have. If we deny our own power we will be more likely to abuse it.

Can we commit ourselves to using the power God gifts us with to witness to Jesus in the world and to build the church, rather than to build only our own kingdoms?

Ah, the sun and the wind. I know that in nature both are extremely important, but for the sake of this sermon, I invite you to align yourself with the power of the sun.