

“The Problem of Power”
a sermon preached by Rev. David Carl Olson

January 3, 2010
First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

We had a problem. It was August, a time when lots of people in Boston are on vacation. But not the janitors, of course, not the janitors who clean the office buildings downtown to be gleaming symbols of our prosperity and power 52 weeks a year. The janitors were in town, and they—we—had a problem.

We needed to find a way for the often voiceless, often immigrant workers to live in our city as full residents—and with our companionship, as actual citizens—and people with voices that would be heard. And we needed them to begin to feel that their voices could be, would be, heard; that their lives would be paid attention to. And we needed to feel powerful together—many voices from throughout the city openly declaring the kind of city we wanted to be, truly.

We organized a march, a little on the QT; the janitors, their union and community supporters received a permit to march on a lonely August afternoon, about the time that people (not on vacation) working in offices would be leaving and people working on cleaning crews would be showing up. We received a permit from the city to march on the sidewalks in some places and to walk into the street with a police escort where needed, but there was no permit for us to stop and rally. This was a march only, an informational, attention-getting action that would not “mean” anything.

We couldn't let that happen. The organizers of the march had made arrangements with other forces in the labor movement to disobey the city and steal a piece of property to hold an impromptu rally. The Teamsters and the Stagehands unions were going to pull up a big truck and, in only a couple of minutes, erect a small stage with sound system, and several important public figures—a State Representative, the President of the City Council, a rabbi, a priest—were going to address the janitors and congratulate them.

My job was especially fun. I was to carry the banner at the head of the parade along with several janitors and their kids. We were to chant and sing as we followed the motorcycles of the police. We joyfully approached the triangular park outside the regional headquarters of Bank of America, just across the street where, in a previous decade, we had been arrested protesting the sale of krugerrands. It was there that we would take a turn. We'd walk along one side of the triangular park, and then along the other side, and then take an unexpected quick turn back to bring the front of the march quickly back into the plaza, which would almost instantly fill with hundreds of janitors and supporters. We'd cut off the security people in the bank from the teamsters and techies, and before the police escort knew what hit 'em, the politicians would be on the stage and speaking.

Leading the crowd into the plaza was easy, but confronting the bank's security people was going to be the challenge. And I wasn't sure what would happen. So I smiled at the other people holding the banner, kept chanting, nodded to them and we took the turn.

As we expected, the security people were at the window as the march walked by. We were a pretty amusing sight. But when we made our quick turn, and as the truck pulled up behind us and began unloading, a large, Black man with a badge rushed toward me and said, "You can't stay here. You're trespassing. This is private property."

I made a guess—assumed a stereotype, actually—that this man might be interrupted in his intentions if I used language that came from another place in his life than his job as a security guard. And so as he places his large belly in front of me and told me to stop, I bumped my formidable belly into his and said, "Brother, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." There is no such thing as private property, I was asserting. And he was distracted enough by my use of Biblical language that it took a moment for him to recompose himself, and by then, the City Council President was speaking. And the rally went on.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" is an assertion about power. All power, this thought says, derives from the one who created everything. "*Dios todopoderoso*," my partner Leonel would pray, "God Almighty." These assertions of power, these appeals to power, these assumptions that any of us have might access to the power that runs the Universe and created everything that is—this is a problem, a great problem for those of us who see the world as a place of unequal power.

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," Lord Ashton would aver, and many of us who have forsaken hierarchical religion are ready to see all power as bad, oppressive, stifling, tainted, evil . . .

In a religion that doesn't talk much about evil, it is interesting to see how easily we demonize power. We have an unattractive (and maybe unhelpful) habit of exhibiting fear about power. We think that those in power use their power in unjust ways—the corporation that runs rampant over the environment; the politician that calls himself a servant but rules as a master; the commission or authority that skirts the law to impose undemocratic measures for the sake of development. We see bad power everywhere. We fear that the Minister will exert too much influence on the church's decisions. We are wary of a Board that acts decisively and sets a direction. We are curious about the power of "those people" in the religious education program, or the choir, or the kitchen . . .

You may disagree with me, but I think we have plenty of lived evidence that we think that there is something wrong with power.

But let me tell you something: it is not only power which corrupts, but powerlessness corrupts. Powerlessness leads to corruption, to individual survival behaviors that are not in

the interest of other individuals and the community, to escapism in wacky religion and mind-altering substances, to bribery and favoritism to gain the approval of the ones with just a little more power. Powerlessness corrupts!

But this kind of power is a power which is unidirectional—it is “power over.” The corporation that ignores the consequences of its actions is exerting power over the environment or over the workers or over the consumers which is unidirectional. The corporation has the power, the environment, the workers, the consumers have less power. Power over. We don't want anyone to have that kind of power.

But there must be another way of exhibiting power that is not unidirectional, not power over? I'd argue that there are authentic experiences of lateral power, of shared power, of “power with.” And that power is the kind of power that feeds our work as a congregation.

Power with—relational power—shared power. This is the kind of power—the power of mutuality, of decisions made together and carried out together—that is a good kind of power. A kind of power that we want more of.

I think I get a little off the track when I think of “good” power and “bad” power, of course. Looked at from many different angles, we might decide that one's perspective tells one whether the power is good or bad. In my best thinking, I guess I'd rather say that power is actually neutral. Power is simpler than we make it out to be when we load it with good and bad meanings.

In Spanish, for example, the word *poder* is the verb that means “having the ability to act.” Power then has a little less baggage. “*Puedo tomar una soda*” could ask, “Do I have the power to drink some soda?” Or more simply, “Can I have some soda?” It is a statement about power, but less loaded with interpretive meaning.

Power means simply the ability to act. The ability to get a job done. The ability to play to organ and make us cry, to sing in four part harmony and bring us in on the song, the ability to read from that lectern and to make it to church each and every Sunday morning—these are all examples of power, all examples of an exercise of ability, capacity. And I can't think of something a church ought to be about more than helping people develop lives of ability.

Power with. Ability to act together. Capacity to bring others into the circle of action.

I want to turn, for a second, to our biblical reading from this morning. In the Greek of the New Testament, there are two central notions of power. These don't differentiate between power over and power with—that we have to find in the context. But it interests me to think of these two notions.

Exousia “usually bears the sense of the right or authorization to exercise power.” (Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 15) I love thinking about power as part and parcel of

our inherent human rights; we have a right to exercise our power for our full development, for our betterment as people and for the betterment of our species and the world we inhabit. That kind of power is good! We need more of that.

The other Greek notion is the one from which we get all the “dynamo” words. *Dynamis* represents the capacity to act. A dynamic church is a church with great capacity to do something. Likewise, “[t]he miracles of Jesus are often called *dynameis*, powerful acts, an interesting juxtaposition [in the gospel of Mark] of pastoral healing and prophetic power.” (Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice*, 45-46).

A people’s ability to act, a community’s right to act; these fundamental assertions which see power not as a problem but as the actual reason we get together each week—to share our power and to get greater things done together—these assertions coincide with the admonition in the letter of James. He insists that acts are evidence of faith. A church with a dynamic faith, in James’s eyes, would be a church of dynamic acts.

Now, these acts must, in my opinion, be derived through an exercise of mutuality to be powerful acts of the relational variety. If we were the big church on the block, we might have the power to act unilaterally to displace people, to tear down buildings, to prevent democratizing legislation from going forward in the Maryland General Assembly. We could exercise our power in a negative and unidirectional way.

But if we are committed to acting relationally, we discover in our acts a glimpse of our ends, a case of becoming the way we hope one day to be. Rabbi Michael Lerner says, “The logic of Pharaoh could never make sense of the logic of Moses, the logic of Rome could never make sense of the logic of Jesus, the logic of police sergeant “Bull” Connor could never make sense of the logic of Martin Luther King, Jr. The spiritual politics of the Left Hand of God” [Olson: that is, the understanding of God as a nurturing deliverer of hope, as opposed to the obedience-demanding enforcer of fear]—these spiritual politics “confront the empires and the social practices of domination with a loving energy that by the criteria of the powerful can seem insubstantial and dismissible, like a bothersome mosquito that makes noise but ultimately can’t really do much damage. That loving energy nevertheless has an immense potential to change everything, to the extent that people are able to sustain the position of hope.” (Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God*, 87-88)

This notion of a Love which is powerful is the notion that our Universalist forbears long preached. Love was a real force, a vital energy that was much more than our kind or familial or amorous feelings for one another. Love was the power that was remaking the whole Universe in the way of wholeness and unity. This is the power of principles.

Such a power is meaningless without a deeper understanding of the workings of power, the principles of relational power. Dennis Jacobsen paraphrases theologian Paul Tillich with these words: “To exercise the principles of power without the power of principles leads to tyranny. To live out the power of principles without the principles of power leads to

sentimentality. Together, the principles of power and the power of principles can lead us to justice.” (Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice*, 47).

And so here we are, in our church, thinking together about the work we have to do as a people of faith. We are called to prove our faith, as it were, by our acts. We are called to exercise lateral power, shared power, relational power. This afternoon, we will encourage each other to more fully live with each other in sharing the ministry of this church, the joys of our being together and the costs of our involvement in this sacred tradition. And we will do so not begrudging the challenges before us, but celebrating the power we have—the ability we have to chart our own course together—the dynamic possibility we have to be a people of prophetic witness and pastoral presence to each other and to a hurting world.

Take heart. We have the power to meet the challenges we face. May these oft-quoted words of Marianne Williamson encourage us to an exercise of power, a faithful exercise of the power we have to be and to become the community we are called to exhibit. “[O]ur deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone.” (Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love*, 190-91).

It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. What power! What power!

Blessed be! Ashe, ashe! Shalom! Salaam! Amen!