

God's Only Power Is Love

Text: I Corinthians 1: 18-25

What is power?

The simplest definition, at least with respect to persons, is that it is what allows one to act and to do things. It is by power that we get things done – power of a certain sort allows us to express ourselves; power is how we defend ourselves, it is how we change the world, and it is how we wrestle from the world, physical and social, the necessities of life. If you have very little power, your actions will be small and ineffectual; you will be very vulnerable to the predations of those who do have power. If you have great power, well, you can be, as the ancient Greeks defined the heros, “a doer of deeds and a sayer of words.”

But where does power come from? How is it effectual? In a very basic and important way, our understanding of power roots it in the physical; we see power coming from physical force and it is as physical force that we see it as effectual. We have great power if we can move heavy things; power over men isn't much different, for it is *moving* others that defines having social power. To be powerful on the playground rarely means having a great personality; as an adult, it may take a great personality to become a leader, but actually being the powerful leader of a world power usually has something to do with commanding an army. Even in things strictly economic, where armies are not obviously in view, having power really means being able to bend others to your will, and to do your bidding. No matter how sophisticated and discrete, being powerful therefore tends to have this sense of physical force behind it; we consistently, and nearly exclusively use metaphors of physical force to talk about power. In fact, it is almost impossible to talk of power without using metaphors of physical force.

In this regard, I would also have us note that power in human affairs is often something

quite distinct from wisdom. We all hope that those who have great power also are men and women of great wisdom. But we all know, too, that, unfortunately, the combination is a rare one; you don't have to be smart or wise to have power. We also know that of the two, power usually is the more valued commodity and is regarded as the more effective. As Pascal once noted, might does not make right, but justice without might is utterly ineffective. Thus people tend to pursue power first. And one might even suspect here that power and wisdom even tend to exclude each other as it often seems that having a lot of power tends to corrupt one's wisdom, one's intelligent planning of what to do. After all, planning is not so much of an issue if you have the power to get what you want without the intermediate step of thought.

Now, if this is what power means to us, let us think further and ask what it means to talk of God's power. Here, many would simply stand on what they already know about human power and then extend it and magnify it in the case of God. Indeed, even the Bible itself seems to talk this way. If Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the ancient world, then God's power would seem to be seen in the fact that in a contest with God, Pharaoh always loses. Indeed, Pharaoh when facing God doesn't even have control over his own heart and judgement. Every time he wants to give in because he has just lost a contest with God, God hardens his heart so that Pharaoh will foolishly pitch himself into the ring one more time to undergo yet another humiliating pummeling.

But with respect to God, thinking about God's power this way is ultimately wrong. If you think about it a bit longer and harder, it doesn't even make a lot of sense to think about God's power as anything at all like physical power, no matter how great. For one thing, God doesn't have a body so it is hard to figure where God would get physical power or how God could use it if he had it. But there are other problems, too. Consider, for example, what it might mean here to

talk about God's power in making the world. We know how to use power to make things. If we have some power, we can make tables and chairs and bird houses. If we have a lot of power at our disposal, we can make monumental buildings, moving mountains and removing forests in the process. If the power to do all this isn't in our own arms, still we know how to harness the energy of natural resources, and how to put the power of several people together to get big jobs done. Thus we can rearrange matter so that stones that once lay in the earth can now soar many stories into the sky. So, if it takes power on this grand scale to make buildings, then it stands to reason that God's power in making a world would simply be as many times greater as the size of the world is greater than a big building. But that can't be right. For how could power of this sort *ever* bring something out of nothing as God brings a world out of nothing? Power of the physical sort can rearrange whatever exists, but power of the physical sort can do nothing with nothing. No, God's power, even God's power in making a huge, immense world, is power of a very different sort. God gets things done in different ways than we do.

I bring this up for two very basic reasons. First, because power is so very crucial to our lives, because it is how we get things done, and therefore as a result we are constantly chasing after it when it is not chasing us around. Thus, because power is so important to us, we need to understand what kinds of power there really are and what they do. The second reason is because we understand God's power so badly, especially with respect to God's power in our lives. We tend to think of it as being just like our power, just bigger. As a result, we therefore misunderstand what God does in reclaiming our lives as God's own. We think it means giving us more power in our sense of power, we think that it means that God helps us get the power we chase after so that we can be more effective in our projects, although perhaps with a bit more delicacy. We think God's power overpowers us. But the fact of the matter is that God is really

doing things very differently; in fact, in trying to reclaim our lives, God is actually trying to get us to think about power differently than we normally do; for God in reclaiming our lives as God's own is trying to give us God's power, and not worldly power. And God's only power is love.

Consider here simply some very basic biblical contrasts between what we think power is and what God thinks it is. When God chose Israel to be the nation that would bear his name and image in the world, to get God's projects done in the world, did God pick the nation that was most powerful? Did God think that this was the most effective way of getting his point across? No, in fact, as God points out to Israel rather regularly, Israel was nothing and *that* is why it was elected. When Israel went into battle, they won, when they won, not because they were the biggest and baddest army in the ancient middle east (they weren't); their success was because God went with them. And when they lost their kingdom, which was what they thought God had wanted for them and was the thing that marked success, it was then that it finally dawned on them that the one who prospered in God's eyes was not the mighty, but the one who walked humbly with his God. In fact, they discovered that walking humbly with God *is* spiritual success and spiritual power. And then consider finally, and most importantly, how they became a light to all the rest of the nations. It was not by their military or economic success, or by having a kingdom; it was, as Isaiah pointed out, by their *suffering*.

Isaiah sums up on God's behalf all God's plans and all God's power and all this history in this way: "My ways are not your ways, nor are my thoughts your thoughts. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts, and my ways higher than your ways." Although God did not use the sort of power that men and women too often worship, yet, Isaiah continues, God's word is *always* effective, unlike human power. For "My word shall

not return to me until it has done the thing for which I sent it, and that which I purpose.” That consistency on return is rarely the case for the sort of power we chase after.

Or consider a situation a bit closer to us in time, and in practice. Paul had spent eighteen months in Corinth developing the new Christian congregation there. No sooner did he leave for other corners of the mission field than arguments broke out among the Corinthians about who was the smartest, and who was the most important among them; in short, about who was the most powerful. Paul, upon hearing of the arguing, wrote to them and said, as we read in today’s epistle lesson, that they had turned his message all around. For the wisdom of God that he was talking about is not the wisdom that the world knows. Indeed, the logic of the cross that he had been talking about and which is God’s wisdom always appears foolish to the world. It appears weak and ridiculous, as the Romans meant crucifixion to appear so that they could underline their own power to the peoples that they dominated. Yet, the crucifixion of Christ, Paul maintains, *is* the power and wisdom of God. The crucifixion of Christ, *is* the way that God gets things done. It is the way God plans to get things done. The crucifixion is not something that hides or masks God’s power. It *is* God’s power; *it* is the word that never returns to God empty.

Now what in heaven’s name, does this mean? Well, consider what Paul goes on to tell the Corinthian hotshots: they think they have become wiser, smarter, more sophisticated and more important than anybody else; they think that they really are somebodies. Yet, Paul says, they have not understood God’s wisdom and power at all. Not that there isn’t really is a divine wisdom and power that one should aspire to, indeed, Paul says that there is and even calls it a secret wisdom. It does make one special. But this secret wisdom, this divine wisdom that God has and that God gives, is the wisdom not of self importance and dominance but of self sacrifice and service, and of being last in the parade. If there is a divine power that changes things, it is not the power of

domination, but the ability to get things done through service, through persuasion and not force.

This is true first of all in how God deals with us. God changes us not by forcing us to do anything. To be restored to God's image is a matter of, above all, changing the way that we think and the way that we exercise our wills. Our thinking, our willing can only be changed from within; nobody can make another person think something that they don't believe, and if anybody forces another to will something that they otherwise don't want to do, then it isn't their will that is being done, but the one who possesses might. So God doesn't force anybody to change. What God does do, is to give the beauty of the example of love, self-sacrifice, service, patience and goodness in Jesus Christ, hoping to stir our conscience, and God gives by the Spirit inner encouragement and grace when we leave ourselves open to be encouraged and to be moved. As St. Augustine put it: "God does nothing by violence, but everything by persuasion and warning." Or, as the great eastern Church Father, Gregory of Nyssa put it in similar terms: "This is how God does things. For his custom is to persuade, not to manhandle mortal men. What's forced has no reward, it seems to me." Indeed, with us, God's only power is love.

But it is also true with respect to how God deals with the world. Although the cross has been used as a symbol to lead armies, and as a weapon against infidels, the power of the cross to change lives and the direction of the world does not lie in force, and never has. It lies in the ability to make service and care and patience and persuasion more important in world affairs than force is. Now, there is a constant struggle between force and these things, and that struggle is not one where it is very obvious that service, care, patience and persuasion are winners. There is something bitterly realistic about Hitler's comment when told that the Pope and the church would be unhappy about his policies: "So how many divisions does the Pope have?" But in the end, Christian faith in Christ's death and resurrection believes that it is by the very *lack* of armored

divisions that the world will be changed. Indeed, at the end of the day Hitler's armored divisions did not carry the day, nor could they ever carry the human spirit forward. Where the human spirit was carried forward, once Hitler was stopped, was in things such as the Marshall Plan which the U.S. used to rebuild Europe. Where it was carried forward was in institutions such as the U.N. where persuasion, and cooperation were put ahead of force. And where those institutions have been ineffective, it is not where they have lacked force, but where they have tried to imitate it or where they have let it intrude. And, it is institutions such as Martha's Table or Doctors without Borders, and it is in every man and woman of faith who puts him or herself on the line for others.

In the end, then, the power to change lives and to build something enduring is therefore not the power that is rooted in force. It is in something else. Many years ago, Anatole France, the great French novelist, wrote a story of Jesus' time and of Jesus' death. As France told it, when Pontius Pilate allowed the judicial murder of Jesus, Pilate dismissed the awfulness of the act by resting on what he considered the importance of the glory of Roman power and his own position as a Roman governor, by resting on the world historical significance of maintaining Roman power, and by simply shrugging his shoulders and saying, "Who a year from now will even remember this Jesus of Nazareth?" And, yet, as France concludes his story, if it were not for Jesus of Nazareth and his effect on history, nobody would ever remember Pontius Pilate at all. Of the two, Roman power, and God's power in love, it is God's power in the cross that has endured. Of the two, the power in terrorism and God's powerless power in Christ, it is God's power in love that will endure and change things. Of the two, human economies and God's economy of salvation, it is God's power in love that will endure even now. For it is only in the power of love that there is sufficient promise and hope and *room* for the human spirit. It is only by that power of service, self-sacrifice, patience and humility and persuasion that we can ever really be changed

for the better.

Therefore, during this Lent, friends, go out and increase in yourselves that power of love, not the other kind of power; increase in yourselves that power of service, of humility, of patience and persuasion that you may find the true life that endures and that God promises. Increase in yourselves God's power. And may then the world, in the persuasive beauty of your example, find the power to be changed itself.