

## How Will You Exercise Power?

People of God – people of powerful Love, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: How will you exercise power? This question implies that each of us does possess some measure of power (power being the ability to act in ways that affect circumstances and influence others). How will you exercise your capacity to act in ways that affect circumstances and influence others?

- Will you exercise your power in ways that contribute to the purposes of love and justice?
- Will you either abuse your power or neglect to exercise your power in ways that contribute to the perpetuation of hate and injustice?

With deep gratitude, we gather to worship God (which is Love) on this seventh Sunday in our long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year. We are present via livestream, watching the recording later, or physically together here in the Sanctuary at People's Church for the first time since March 8<sup>th</sup> of 2020.

We acknowledge today and every day that this beautiful, beloved building stands on and which was once home and taken from the Wahpekute tribe of Dakota people.

Please join your hearts with mine in prayer. Holy Spirit, you search each of our hearts; you sit with us as a quiet, steady, loving energy; you lead us to discover our potential for growth; you nudge us to next brave and uncomfortable steps forward for the sake of love and justice. Be with us now as we wonder about how we will exercise our power – our capacity to act in ways that affect circumstances and influence others. And as you guide the meditations of our hearts and minds; O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Fellow journeyers, friends who share a longing to follow in the way of Jesus – a way of radically inclusive, justice-seeking, peace-building love, across the past week I have referred to today's gospel reading about Herod beheading John the baptizer as terrible and horrible. But as our Bible Study group discussed the text this past Wednesday, we recognized a quality more glaring than its terror and horror – that is, it's relatability to our ways of abusing power in our own contexts today (whether by action or neglect).

That this story makes us squirm with feelings of disgust, judgement and a longing to avoid and forget it has more to do with its deep resonance with circumstances in our private and public lives than with its gruesomeness. Instead of avoiding it, I invite us to let it speak truth to us.

A moment ago, I asserted that we all have power – that each of us has capacity to act in ways that affect circumstances and influence others. I also believe that we all abuse power. It is not nearly as helpful to label some other person as an abuser as it is helpful to recognize our own and eventually others' abuse of power.

Recognizing how I myself and you yourself have abused power can be a mighty application of the challenge Matthew's gospel remembers Jesus issuing to his followers both then and now:

*“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.” (Matthew 7:3-5)*

Perhaps like me, you have previously assured yourself that Herod's sinful actions are far removed from your own living, entirely different than how you would have acted if in his shoes. Othering someone is a way of falsely assuring oneself of one's own normalcy and goodness. But if you agree with me that we each have power, what does it mean to abuse power? Simply put, abuse is misusing something to bad effect or treating another in a cruel or violent way. It is important that we recognize and name abuse of power in the public sphere – by the police officer who murdered George Floyd, by elected leaders who support policies that make life harder for historically marginalized and oppressed groups of people, and the list goes on. Recognition is the necessary precursor to deepened understanding and political action.

In coming months in our life as a congregation, our Justice and Outreach Team and our Antiracism Task Force will invite us into uncomfortable, generative learning about our complicity in racism and other intersecting forms of injustice that are undergirded by abuse of power. Next week, our Antiracism Task Force will lead us in discussion of the results of a recent congregation-wide survey which had a seventy percent participation rate and which sought to check in on our thoughts and feelings related to racism. Racist policies are most certainly a form of abuse – the misuse of racial power to bad effect for others.

Today, I ask us to focus on considering how we ourselves abuse power in our private or personal lives. We daily have opportunity to exercise power – to act in ways that affect circumstances and influence others. And we frequently abuse our power – misusing it in ways that negatively affect circumstances or harm another.

Cruelty and violence are strong words. Perhaps like me, you wish to believe that you rarely act in a cruel or violent way. But we do, in fact, act in ugly ways that that cause harm, don't we? We sometimes react from places of our own woundedness, interacting with others in such a way that our words or actions disregard their dignity and worth and diminish the life-affirming connection between us.

Let's wonder together about the possibility of staying present in our moments of heightened emotion and intense opinion. Holding a posture of openness and wonder can lead to responding to another in a way that upholds mutual regard for dignity and a life-affirming connection as opposed to how a defensive fight-or-flight posture can led to reacting in an abusive way, misusing our capacity to affect circumstances and influence others.

Could intentional practice of openness and wonder be one of the most powerful ways we participate in salvation? Ancient and present-day prophets illuminate how the experience of salvation is our cyclical, rigorous return to the heart of God – love of neighbor and self. He heard from the Psalmist,

*“Surely God's salvation is at hand for those who fear God,  
that God's glory may dwell in our land.  
Righteousness will go before God,  
and will make a path for God's steps.”* (Psalm 85: 9, 13)

The Psalmist knew the power of holding a posture of fear in God's presence – meaning awe and reverence that cause pause. Might it be that a reverent pause is the necessary precursor to righteous action (the next right step) that can make a path for the steps of God's love in the world?

Where or with whom have you learned effective ways of pausing before acting with intention? Some of you know that I was an exchange student as a teenager through Rotary International and then supported the exchange program as a Rotarian when I lived in Texas and Wisconsin. Community service organizations often have a mission statement or pledge that they keep at the forefront of their activity as a group and consider a welcome influence in their individual private and professional interactions.

At the start of any Rotary Club meeting, the club president leads what is called “The Four-Way Test” in call and response style. It goes like this:

*Of the things we think, say or do,*

- *First, is it the truth?*
- *Second, is it fair to all concerned?*
- *Third, will it build goodwill and better friendships?*
- *Fourth, will it be beneficial to all concerned?*

Rotary’s Four-Way Test has had a significant impact on me. It challenges me to consider the power I have to affect circumstances and influence people in anything I say or do. And it reminds me that what I think impacts what I say and do.

I’ll repeat my invitation from a moment ago: Let’s wonder together about the possibility of staying present in our moments of heightened emotion and intense opinion. Holding a posture of openness and wonder can lead to responding to another in a way that upholds mutual regard for dignity and a life-affirming connection as opposed to how a defensive fight-or-flight posture can lead to reacting in an abusive way, misusing our capacity to affect circumstances and influence others.

In the spirit of the Rotary Four-Way Test, we might consider adding to our daily living a simple yet powerful practice of asking ourselves what, why, who and how.

- What am I feeling or thinking right now?
- Why am I feeling or thinking that? Or, what is at stake for me right now?
- Who will I affect by how I respond?
- How will I choose to respond?

May we move into each new moment and each new day, praying for the patience and grace to hold postures of openness and wonder, so that we might be ever more ready to exercise power in ways that uphold mutual dignity and life-affirming connections. Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
People’s Congregational Church | Bayport, MN  
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*Psalm 85: 8-13, Mark 6: 6b-29*