

August 25, 2019

From our Collect of the Day:

*Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name...*

That your Church may show forth your power...Let's talk about power for a few minutes.

I like power. Raw power. I found this out about myself very early on. In my case, this fascination with power showed up in my interest in cars. The faster the better. By the time I was a teenager, I was convinced that everything in life would be better if we hooked up a supercharger to it.

In the Navy, I was a jet engine mechanic. The ultimate power plant. After my enlistment, I worked as a heavy equipment mechanic at the PNS. We looked after those huge atlas imperial engines that powered the dock cranes.

So, I confess to you, I am into power. Now, as I've grown older, I've explored other forms of power, such as the power some social institutions, or the power that certain personalities hold over a group. I find these power dynamics among people interesting, although I still consider flying down a back road in a well tuned machine to be the greatest power thrill of all.

But, let's talk about the power dynamics among people for a little bit. In today's story, of Jesus healing the crippled woman, who had the power? In the end, Jesus did, although the leader of the synagogue thought he did. As a matter of fact, at first reading, this story does seem like simply a debate between two rabbis regarding the law, doesn't it? And in the end, Jesus won the argument, because he had more juice, more power, than the other guy.

Is that all this story is about? I'm not so sure. Yes, I do think it is a story about power, but not in the way we might at first define that term.

Let me explain. One of the terms often used as a synonym for power is "authority." In the Gospels, we often hear of Jesus speaking with authority"...speaking with great power. Now, the term "authority," as traditionally used in Christian circles, is derived from the Greek concept of "exousia," which is consistently translated into English as "authority." However, the Greek concept of authority is far more complex in comparison to our normal understanding of the term. We tend to think of "authority", and "power" as a tool of domination. But Jesus was clear that is not what he meant; Jesus said, "The Gentiles lord their authority (kata-exousia) over one another, but not so with you!"

If you look at the different ways the term "exousia" is used in scripture, it does indeed sometimes refer to power, strength and control, but also competency, mastery, liberty and freedom. In other words, the one with "exousia" is the one who has "the freedom to act." Jesus, as the Son of God, speaks and acts with authority. As we faithfully follow him, we also receive, to a more limited degree, this same exousia, this same "freedom to act."

As a matter of fact, one way to understand Jesus mission is that it was all about giving everyone this exousia, this freedom to act.

Remember the words Jesus used to proclaim the beginning of his earthly ministry:

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn”*

One way Jesus described what he was doing to those who asked was that he came to set the captives free.

And that’s what he did in today’s story. This crippled woman had the least power, the least authority, the least freedom, of anyone in the story. Not only was she a woman in a very patriarchal society, but she was also crippled. Yet Jesus calls to her.

Isn’t that always the way of Jesus? He calls out to the least of those in any setting. He welcomes the children, the sick, the troubled, those worn down by their heavy burdens. He has a clear bias for the powerless. It is those held captive by the troubles and evils of this world that he seeks out. He seeks them out to set the captives free.

So, he stretches out his hand, and sets the woman free. And she immediately stands up tall. No longer is she one who endures great pain with every step and hides in the back of the crowd to avoid ridicule. She is restored to what she was always intended to be, a daughter of Abraham.

Now, the leader of the synagogue is going on and on about the rules of the Sabbath. In his mind, Jesus did not have the power, the freedom to act, to perform such a healing. Jesus points out that it was a loosening of that which was bound...an act of setting the woman free, not some kind of traditional healing that was going on.

And so the two men debate. What is the woman doing? When Jesus laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. She is now set free to act, in any way she feels is fitting. And so, this daughter of Abraham begins to praise God.

Of all the creatures on earth, humans are the only species that we know for certain are conscious of God. In those moments when I am able to free myself from all cares and concerns of this life, and bask in the joy of simply being alive, it is a song of praise to God that forms on my lips. Sometimes, it seems as if praising God may be one of the main reasons I exist. When I offer such heartfelt praise during such moments of freedom, it is as if I’m giving my voice to the rest of this silent creation. And I tend to think that’s a fairly important thing to do.

So, who has the power in this story? In the end, I think it is the daughter of Abraham who expresses her authority, her freedom to act, by spontaneously breaking out in praise to God, while the men continue to debate the law.

Do you long to be set free from the troubles and infirmities that bind you? Do you yearn to reclaim your authority as the daughters and sons of God? Let God loosen those ropes that bind you. Allow the healing power of God’s love set you free. Then, together, may we join our voices with this daughter of Abraham, offering our praise and thanksgivings to God.