

The Power of Weakness and the Weakness of Power

Mark 10: 35-45

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 13) 2022

Kyle Childress

Trocme had created a dynamic of resistance; his “originality generated originality in others.”

-Victoria Barnett,

Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust

If you’ve been around here very long, you know that I’m always interested in looking at models of the church being the church throughout history. When were those moments in history when the church was clearly and distinctly faithful to Jesus Christ? And then the subsequent question: how did they get to be like that?

Over the years, I’ve gravitated to a handful of models and moments: the radical reform of the Anabaptists in the 16th century and their followers in the next century, the Baptists. Or the Confessing Church in Germany during the 1930’s in their resistance to Hitler with the theological leadership of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Martin Niemoller. And at the same time, the witness of the church and village in Le Chambon, France, under pastor Andre Trocme, who sheltered Jews under the noses of the Nazis between 1940 and 1945. Or more recently, the black church in America during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

One question I’ve been learning from the black church ever since I was a brand-new pastor in Robertson County in Central Texas forty years ago, is how do we make a difference when we do not have power? The assumption for most of us, especially White people with White perspective and White privilege, is that if we

simply work hard enough, raise enough money, get enough votes, or organize enough, we can eventually gain enough power to tip the scales in our favor. We can make things come out the way we want.

This assumption is what the radical reformed tradition calls a “majority” perspective. A “majority” mindset assumes that we can eventually get the power to make a difference. Black baptist theologian Willie Jennings calls this the perspective of the “white self-sufficient man” (from the Foreword to *Becoming Human: The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race* by Luke A. Powery).

A minority perspective never assumes this. No matter how much we organize or vote or raise money, we will likely never have the power to make things come out our way. So, what do we do then? That’s what I want us to ponder this morning. I want us to think like a minority. Think like the black church has done for decades and quit thinking like a “white self-sufficient man.”

Mark’s Gospel reading this morning might help us. Brothers James and John, known among the other disciples as the “Sons of Thunder” for their audacity and quick temper, came up to Jesus and said, “Teacher, when you win the election, when you take charge, we want you to appoint us to high positions of power so we can help you get things done, run these bad Romans out, and take back our country” (Mk. 10: 35-37). “They’ve beaten us down and we’re sick and tired of it. It’s time for them to get some of their own medicine and you’re just the one to give it to them. So, when you win, appoint us to some positions of power.”

Jesus says, “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t even know what I’m talking about. My way of ruling is by suffering servanthood, not by coercive power.”

The rest of the disciples heard James and John's request and were mad at them and jealous. So, Jesus called all of them together and said, "You know that among those godless Gentiles their rulers lord it over them. Their rulers wield coercive power in order to rule. That's the way they do things. But it is not that way among us. We live a different way. Whoever wants to be great must be a servant, for I came not to be served but to serve, even to give my life" (Mk. 10:41-45).

Throughout Jesus' ministry, everywhere he went, he taught and preached and showed what his kind of servant-rule looked like. When Jesus called his disciples together, he gave them this new way of life to live. A new way to deal with offenders – by forgiving them. A new way to deal with violence – by non-violent suffering. A new way to deal with money – by sharing it. A new way of relationships between woman and man, parent and child, people of different races, gay and straight people, people who are different in all kinds of ways, in which there can be seen a radical new vision of what it means to be human. This new way is called the kingdom of God, the reign of God, the commonwealth of God, the beloved community.

This is the new kind of servant-ruler Jesus showed us when he healed the sick, served the poor, included the outcasts, listened to women and poor widows, lifted up children, ate with sinners, and challenged the religious leaders. This new kind of servant-ruler threatened the social order, was a menace to the political order, disrupted the economic order, and challenged the conventional order. All so he could show us God's new order. And it is this new order of God to which we are invited to become citizens and participants through baptism. And in baptism we are formed into a people, a community which seeks to practice what Jesus preached. A community that the New Testament calls church.

Now all this raises some questions for the church of the White self-sufficient person in America. For the most part, we are more interested in ruling than serving, and when we do we get into trouble. Much of the fear and anger in our society is when the White self-sufficient person starts to lose power, lose privilege, and the White self-sufficient person does not like it.

But those of us who follow Jesus know we are called to begin to see things in a different way. We begin to see differently from those on top. We see differently from the majority mindset. We see from the bottom; from the perspective of those who are ground-down, beaten-down, worn-out, in poverty, and in poverty of spirit – you know what poverty of spirit is? It is when the person in poverty begins to believe deep down inside that he or she really is less than human. So, we learn see from the point of view of those who are diminished, defeated, in despair. We see from the position of weakness. We see from a minority position. We learn to give up the power and assumptions of the White self-sufficient person and take up the Way of the Cross.

It also means that we learn to trust the power of weakness and to recognize the weakness of power. With power there are some things that cannot be accomplished. Sort of like swatting flies with a baseball bat. The Powerful tend to think one-dimensionally, take-over and rule. But those of us who are weak do not have that option, so we have the freedom to try creative ways to live out this kind of life.

Philip Hallie, in his classic book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, about the people of Le Chambon writes that by the end of the summer of 1940, Marshall Petain and the Fascists were firmly in power in France under the authority of the Nazis and sought to generate solidarity through hatred. An order was given from

on high that beginning on the first day of school, all students and faculty would gather in a circle around a flagpole that had just been erected. Everyone would stand at attention, give the Fascist stiff-armed salute, as the flag was raised. A few teachers at the school liked the idea. They said it would save France from anarchy and recover discipline and patriotism. More teachers didn't really believe this but did not want to rock the boat or cause any discomfort or controversy. They reluctantly went along. The head of the school, Edouard Theis, purposely had placed the flagpole out from the school, and not directly in front of it. Then he ruled that making the salute was optional. On the first day he and his best friend, Pastor Andre Trocme refused to salute the flag. Soon more teachers joined them in refusing the salute. And in a few weeks, no one saluted. Author Philip Hallie wrote, "His kind of originality generated originality in others" (p. 92).

The Holy Spirit brings originality and creativity. People without power learn to be open to the surprising power of the Spirit. When we have privilege and are in charge, when we're the majority, who needs the Holy Spirit? But when you're up against the wall, ground down and worn out, we look to the Spirit of the Living God. Furthermore, we learn that God's Spirit is alive and working among us, that unexplained things happen, that good overcomes evil, that people change, hope keeps coming back no matter how much it is beaten down.

People with power are amazingly unimaginative in their approach to solving problems. But we know that the Spirit gives imagination. Are there other ways to deal with pressing issues and problems when all other doors are shut? We vote and organize for elections, but we also march, have vigils, help change public awareness, build relationships, build coalitions and networks, start new endeavors, and more. We use the creativity given by the Holy Spirit, to think about other ways to get things done without Austin or Washington.

We learn to persevere, to outlast those with power. Minority-minded people learn that we are in this for the long haul, maybe generations. We learn to see through the standard way of thinking that says if we seize power today, we can expect results tomorrow. We know better so we learn to put our roots in Christ down deep. We immerse ourselves in prayer, in worship, in the scriptures, and we sing for the long journey.

This is why, for instance, you hear lots of stories – and some say that minority-minded people tell more stories than majority-minded people – but you hear lots of stories from me of singing in the face of bigotry and racism, singing in the face of fear, singing even in the face of violence. In Feb. 1943, Pastor Andre Trocme was arrested along with his friend Edouard Theis by the Vichy police. Word spread throughout the village, and when the two prisoners approached the town square where the police bus awaited them, the entire village was along the streets and around the square. Suddenly someone started singing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” and then the entire village joined in.

Or in Albany, GA in 1961 Martin Luther King was speaking to a mass meeting in the Shiloh Baptist Church. Outside, across the street an angry White mob carrying clubs and chains grew in size and intensity and started surging toward the church. The few U.S. Marshalls present called for help on their radios, shot tear-gas toward the mob, and retreated inside the church. Meanwhile, the congregation started singing hymns and freedom songs, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” “Ain’t Nobody Gonna Turn Me Around,” and “We Shall Overcome.” Soon the singing became so powerful that journalists inside wrote that it was if the singing pushed the mob outside back.

It is partly why we gather in worship every Sunday – to immerse ourselves in the living God. Because if we’re going to go up against the powers of domination out there during the week, we had better be deeply rooted in the suffering servanthood and love the crucified and resurrected Christ.

We learn to hope when there seems to be no reason for hope. As a people without conventional power, we learn to not be easily excited over things like political victories because we know how pride can come back and thwart us and we know that it is easy when you win to become blind to the bigger picture of what is really going on. At the same time, when things seem to be going badly, we don’t give into despair because we know that there is a bigger picture, a larger story of what is going on. We know that God works in small ways, behind the scenes, like a mustard seed which one day will bloom into something bigger.

We learn to act as the conscience of society, where we speak out on behalf of others and other causes, even though right now there seems to be no one in control interested in what we’re saying. We become a wholesome discomfort in the society at-large.

We specialize in developing “pilot projects,” or modeling ministries, ways of serving that the rest of society is not yet ready for; what Clarence Jordan called “demonstration plots.” So, in history, churches start hospitals, colleges and universities, and public schools, when no one else will and sponsor them until they are eventually taken over by the wider community or by the state. And churches start mental health programs, like we did in the 1970’s when we started and ran the Sheltered Workshop until it was picked up by East Texas MHMR. Or, for another example, in 1991 we helped start a ministry and service with men who had HIV/AIDS called the East Texas AIDS Project, which grew and became Health

Horizons, and grew some more, built a building and is now a full-fledged health clinic, The Brown Family Health Center (see John Yoder's *The Priestly Kingdom*, pp. 91-99 for more on alternative ways to make a difference).

I could go on and on. You get the idea that when we give up the power of control and domination and learn to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, all kinds of things can happen to bring about change in our wider society beyond voting and getting elected. I'm not suggesting that we're not involved in elections and voting. Far from it. I'm simply suggesting that giving up power allows us to see that God is at work in all sorts of ways beyond voting and elections and that our job is to join in with what God is doing.

When I was a student minister at Baylor, there was an elderly woman in the church, Ms. Starnes, who was renowned for her devotion and prayer life. Rumors said she practically had the King James Version Bible memorized. One day, as I approached a prayer meeting that she was leading, an old man said to me, "When Ms. Starnes starts praying, you had better be ready to duck, because things are going to start happening."

Austin Heights Baptist Church may that be our testimony. When we start praying and acting out our prayer, may the whole town be prepared to duck.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.