

Imagine for a moment that you held all the power in the world. Would you be generous in helping people or a tyrant who does as they please? This question about power may excite out the best of our generosity and self-giving or the worst of our ambition and greed.

Writer Robert Ingersoll, in speaking of Abraham Lincoln, said, "But if you wish to know what a man really is, give him power. This is the supreme test. It is the glory of Lincoln that, having almost absolute power, he never abused it, except on the side of mercy." (Volume 3 of the 12-volume "Works of Robert G. Ingersoll, 1902)

Most people think they don't have power unless they are rich, famous, or hold an important position, but everyone has power and how we use it speaks about our character. Each of us has the power to make the world better or worse. How you live your life in relation to those around you is evidence of how you are using your power—you can let your words and actions be led by greed or mercy.

The question for us today is: How does God empower us, and for what purpose?

In the Bible, we find Jesus talking about his power and his willingness to share it with his followers, that is, his disciples. What kind of power is Jesus' power, and does he give it to us? Let's hear from the Book of Acts 1:1-8 to learn about this,

"In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Let's recall the context of this text briefly. For the last few weeks since Palm Sunday, we have been learning about Jesus's journey and that of his disciples. We learned about Jesus coming to Jerusalem before he was killed, his crucifixion and resurrection, and how he appeared to the disciples—including Thomas, Peter, and two on the road to Emmaus.

A lot has been going on during those times. Jesus revealed his resurrection and reminded his followers of what he promised them: a new and everlasting life with him in his kingdom.

All these years, Jesus spent his time calling, teaching, and showing his followers the kingdom of God and its character and power. This was not a kingdom to destroy the enemy, oppress subordinates or break the people's backs to accumulate power and wealth, but a kingdom to save the lost, protect the vulnerable, heal the sick, and feed the hungry—a kingdom to give and sustain life in abundance.

For this, this was not an abstract concept or promise that would take place sometime in the future after our time, but a tangible blessing for today to all people. For example, on many occasions, Jesus stood between abusers and their victims. He defended women and the poor; he confronted the powerful and oppressors. Jesus taught about love, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation from sin and death. In his own words, he said, "I did not come to condemn anyone but to save everyone." (John 3:17)

Can you see the picture here? Jesus is life and uses his power to give life to those that welcome it. His power is not about money, political manipulation, taking advantage of others, or abusing the weak. No, his power was and is for the sake of those he loves. And the crazy thing is that Jesus wants to share his power with us so we can share the life we received from him with others, too.

That is what's going on in the Scripture we read today: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses [everywhere you go]."

This was not the first time Jesus spoke about the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus talked about this promise before, and he explained that when the Holy Spirit (which is the very presence of God with us, not an external force we can manipulate) would come, will remind the disciples of the teachings they learned from Jesus, and will guide them with faith, wisdom, and conviction so they can do the works of Jesus too and teach his teachings. In other words, Jesus' empowerment of his disciples is a commission to continue his work in the world.

But here is where we get it wrong sometimes. Throughout history, we have seen examples of power being corrupted within the church. Financial mismanagement, spiritual abuse, unethical behavior, lack of moral courage and compassion, exclusivity, and elitism are some examples of how the misuse of power has tarnished the church's witness and caused harm to countless individuals. When power is wielded for personal gain, control, or exclusion, it reflects a betrayal of the values of the kingdom of God. Such abuses stem from character flaws such as greed, pride, and a lack of humility—just as Mr. Ingersoll noted when he said, "But if you wish to know what a man really is, give him power."

I have learned over the years how vulnerable the church is to such abuses. We are a community that comes together hoping to see the best in others, so give them our trust. That is a beautiful thing; however, it can easily be abused by people who don't understand and appreciate the gift we have in each other. This happens because people -clergy and lay- who may have little or no power elsewhere (work, school, home, etc.) often see the church as a place where they can get it. In such cases, we need self-awareness to realize when we are not using our power in healthy ways that give and sustain life and the humility to acknowledge our flaws.

Yet, Acts 1:8 reminds us of the transformative potential of power when it is faithfully used in alignment with the purposes of God. The power of the Holy Spirit empowers us to embody Christ's love, compassion, and justice in tangible ways.

Consider how Jesus taught us to love God and our neighbor. He explained that love is practiced through compassion and mercy. Jesus taught us forgiveness and grace; he revealed that

God wants us, and we don't have to prove ourselves worthy to be welcomed into God's presence. Jesus taught us about praying not just for the people we care about but also for those against us; he showed us how to pray like that when we prayed while hanging from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do." Jesus taught us about seeking reconciliation by asking for forgiveness when we sin and forgiving those who sin against us. He urged us not to judge others and be hypocritical but to help each other live better lives. He told us that we could have eternal life through him if we put our trust and faith in him as our Lord and Savior. Ultimately, Jesus didn't teach us about love and compassion in isolation; he demonstrated the power of these virtues within the context of community.

We have seen this demonstration of the power of Jesus at work in our lives. For example, I am reminded when a church member or a friend faces a need or sudden illness, the outpouring of support from our congregation is nothing short of remarkable. From meals delivered to prayers offered and quilts, we are a church where each person plays a vital role in providing comfort and assistance to those in need. This behavior and use of our power exemplify our individual and collective ability to bring positive change to the world around us.

So, true power, as exemplified by Jesus Christ, is not about controlling others or imposing our will upon them. Rather, it is found in humility, service, and sacrificial love. Jesus himself said, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." (Mark 10:43-44).

This message goes beyond the church. The call to faithfully use Jesus' power to give life is as urgent as ever. We live in a world marked by division, abuse, and injustice. We are more ideologically driven today than ever before. We are not trying to come together but to tear apart those who disagree with us because we are being taught that they are our enemies for holding different views on religion, politics, and many other subjects.

However, we are those witnesses Jesus is calling and commissioning with his power to bring good news to a hurting world. We are the church and have a crucial role in confronting these challenges with courage and compassion. Our true worth and identity are not determined by our positions or titles but by our character and the impact we have on the lives of others. As empowered witnesses, we are called to be agents of transformation in our communities, advocating for empathy, extending grace, and sharing the message of hope found in Christ. We have the power to influence the behavior of others and change the world into a place where love, compassion, and forgiveness shape us as human beings. We have the power to stop what's unjust and evil, what's rude and corrupting. We have the power to bring kindness, compassion, love, hope, peace, and so much more to so many. We've got the power.

In conclusion, as we reflect on this, let us recommit ourselves to the call to faithfully use power for God's purposes. May we be empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the love and truth of Christ in our words and actions. May our lives reflect the transformative power of grace as we seek to bring healing, reconciliation, and justice to a broken world. Amen.