

## "The Power of Love"

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

July 1, 2018

*<sup>21</sup>When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea... And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. <sup>25</sup>Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. <sup>26</sup>She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup>She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup>for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." <sup>29</sup>Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup>Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" <sup>31</sup>And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" <sup>32</sup>He looked all around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup>But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup>He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5:21, 24b-34)*

The heart of this story is a charged, even electric, moment. In the midst of a jostling crowd, a sick woman pushes her way toward the teacher. A long line of physicians had been powerless to heal her condition. Any money she had was long gone. It could not have been much to begin with, because her health issue would likely have cut her off from family, community, and any other source of financial security. Without prospects, without power, without even a name that we know of, she is desperate enough to try something audacious.

Just a few feet away, at the center of the same crowd, is Jesus. Back in home territory after venturing across the lake to Gentile land, another multitude has gathered to see what miraculous thing he might do next. His legend is already building. He is amazing people at every turn. He is a hot commodity. He has gained the kind of political capital that leaders crave. His power is being noticed.

"If I can just touch his garment," she said, "I will be healed."

I wonder who she was talking to here. Maybe she said this to someone before she even got to the square, as she planned how she might get close to Jesus. Maybe she said it out loud in the midst of the crowd, hoping that those around her might recognize her as someone who really needed help and clear a path for her. But no one was listening to her, so most likely she just said it silently to herself.

The woman sees Jesus in the crowd. She is close now, but he is still just out of reach. With one final push of her shoulder, she slides through a small gap in the mob. She reaches out her hand, and POW... a quick jolt like a defibrillator to the heart. The text says that both of them felt it "immediately." The woman knew in an instant that she was healed of her disease, because she could feel it in her body. And Jesus was immediately aware of something, too. Jesus felt POWER go out of him.

The Greek word is *dynamis*, an obvious cognate for our English word "dynamite." And that is not far from what happened in that moment. The word *dynamis*, used 120 times in the New Testament, denotes miraculous power, might, strength, energy, a marvelous



70 Union Street North

Concord, NC 28025

(704) 788-2100

info@firstpresconcord.org

work of some kind.<sup>1</sup> A divine spark passed from a man on the rise with immense power to a poor woman from the bottom of society who clearly had none. At its heart, this story of healing is a story of a life being forever changed in a moment of spiritual dynamite.

It is a topic that has always captured the human imagination: power. Who has it and who doesn't? How can we grasp it and how can we resist it? How do we keep it in the hands of people we like and take it away from people we don't? In the late 1990's, an author by the name of Robert Greene became rich with a self-help book that claimed to have the answers to these questions. "The feeling of having no power over people and events is generally unbearable to us," he wrote in the preface. "[W]hen we feel helpless we feel miserable. No one wants less power; everyone wants more."<sup>2</sup>

The book that Greene based on this premise, The 48 Laws of Power, quickly grabbed the attention of actors, hip-hop artists, aspiring politicians, and prison inmates. It has sold more than 1.5 million copies. Fans include celebrities like Will Smith, 50 Cent, Busta Rhymes, Kanye West, and Fidel Castro. The book paints the quest for power as a mental game of duplicity and manipulation. Some of Greene's "laws" or rules for grabbing and holding power include things like this:

**Law 6:** "COURT ATTENTION AT ALL COST: Everything is judged by appearance; what is unseen counts for nothing... Stand out. Be conspicuous, at all cost."

**Law 14:** "POSE AS A FRIEND, WORK AS A SPY..."

**Law 20:** "DO NOT COMMIT TO ANYONE... Do not commit to any side or cause but yourself."

**Law 33:** "DISCOVER EACH MAN'S THUMBSCREW... Everyone has a weakness, a gap in the castle wall... once found, it is a thumbscrew you can turn to your advantage."

**Law 37:** "CREATE COMPELLING SPECTACLES... Dazzled by appearances, no one will notice what you are really doing."

It's not exactly the Sermon on the Mount. For obvious reasons, the book has been labeled a "Bible for atheists" and earned its author the nickname "hip-hop's Machiavelli."<sup>3</sup>

Regrettably, this self-interested, Machiavellian understanding of power dynamics continues to gain ground in our society. It seems to be everywhere. That's why it is critically important that we, as followers of Christ, as guardians of the truth and the gospel, need to pay close attention to the kind of power that Jesus seeks, and the ways that Jesus uses the power that he has. What can we learn from this story in Mark about the Christian view of power?

1. The first thing we see here is that CHRISTIAN POWER HELPS THE WEAK; NOT THE STRONG. In a world that seems to value getting ahead and staying ahead more than anything else, Jesus uses his divine power to help the weak, the small, the downtrodden, and the outcast. This poor woman was so insignificant in the eyes of her community that the story doesn't even know her name. But Jesus didn't care. She still received the full measure of his power. Christ did not employ his power to make those who are already strong even stronger. The power of Christ flowed to the broken people, the lowly people, and the people who could not catch a break. And that prompts us, as those who are called to follow that Savior, to ask where the weak might be in our society today.

---

<sup>1</sup> *dynamis*, <http://biblehub.com/greek/1411.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Greene, *The 48 Laws of Power* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), xvii.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/03/robert-greene-48-laws-of-power>, June 28, 2018.

Who are the people who don't have a name? Who are the ones being crushed by systems of power? Who needs help the most? And how can we use our power to help them?

2. The second thing we find in this story of Christ's power is that CHRISTIAN POWER IS NEVER COERCIVE. One of the most famous definitions of power comes from the philosopher Max Weber, who essentially said that power is the ability to impose one's will on others despite resistance, to make others comply even if they might not want to initially.<sup>4</sup> This is *not* the kind of power embraced by Christ. In neither this story about the woman with a hemorrhage, nor the story of the young, dying daughter of Jairus that Mark weaves in and around it, does Jesus impose his will. His offer of power is purely invitational. It is the woman, not Jesus, who seeks out this encounter by pushing through the crowd and reaching out her hand. It is Jairus who is invited to believe even as everyone around him is laughing at Jesus' offer of life. God could have imposed righteousness on the world, but at this point, he still chooses to call us into it – to open the door and invite us in instead of pushing us through it. The power of Christ is never coercive or manipulative.

3. A third thing we learn in this story is that CHRISTIAN POWER IS ALWAYS WILLING TO RISK THE COMFORT OF THE SELF FOR THE HEALTH OF THE OTHER. The evangelist Tony Campolo once observed something interesting that happens when we love another person. "The more you love," he said, "the more power you give up. Love makes you vulnerable."<sup>5</sup> And that is exactly what Jesus did when he helped this woman. Arguably, Jesus squandered a great deal of worldly power by even giving this woman the time of day. She shouldn't have touched him in her condition. It would have been socially awkward for her to have touched him even if she was perfectly healthy. It was not her place.

Not only that, Jesus' actions here violated one of Greene's most prominent laws of power: "**Law 10: AVOID THE UNHAPPY AND UNLUCKY...** You can die from someone else's misery... You may feel you are helping the drowning man but you are only precipitating your own disaster." This poor woman was clearly unhappy and unlucky, drowning in the misery of her circumstances. It would have been better for Jesus to keep moving, to not get involved.

We should be thankful every day, however, that Christ did not live by this law... that he was willing to welcome the unhappy and the unlucky, that he deigned to dine with sinners and enter the houses of tax collectors. We should thank God every hour that Christ precipitated his own disaster to save us from ours... that he was willing to let the waves and billows of sin pull him down so that we might not drown, but have life with him. In the hands of Christ, true power is always willing to sacrifice, with love and courage, its own comfort for the health and well-being of those who are in need.

4. Last but certainly not least, we see in this story an example of how CHRISTIAN POWER ALWAYS OPERATES WITH LOVE FOR THE SAKE OF LOVE. In the mind of Jesus, there seems to be no difference between love and power. They seek the same things, operate in the same way, and serve the same ends. In other words, I think Jesus would say the same things about power that Paul said about love... that Christ's kind of power is patient; that it is kind; that it is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... that Christian power does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth... that Christ's kind of power bears all things,

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/144078337701300308?journalCode=josa>, June 28, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> <https://juicyecumenism.com/2012/09/12/tony-campolos-power-delusion/>, June 28, 2018.

believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... and that the greatest thing about power is what it can do in the name of love.<sup>6</sup>

Years ago a sociology professor gave an assignment to his college class. They were to go into a particular slum in the inner city of Baltimore and obtain case histories of at least 200 young boys in that neighborhood. For each history, the students had to reflect on the story and try to evaluate boy's future prospects. Almost every time, the students thought the chances for a happy, healthy life were next to zero. There was just too much poverty, too much brokenness, too much dysfunction to overcome.

Twenty-five years later, another sociology professor in that same college uncovered the earlier project. He decided that his students should do a follow-up study to see if those prior predictions of disaster had been correct. They found that 20 of the boys in the original study had either moved away or died. Remarkably, however, they also found that, of the 180 who still lived in the neighborhood or close by, a staggering 176 of them had achieved better-than-average degrees of success. In fact, many of them had become lawyers, doctors and businessmen. When they followed up with these people and asked them what they felt helped them along the way, every last one of them said, with great emotion, something to the effect of, "Well, there was this teacher..."

Fortunately, the professor was able to track down this woman who had clearly had such a remarkable effect on her young students. He wanted to know her magic formula. What resources had she used? What strategies had she employed? What kinds of books, for example, had she read to them? She just smiled as he asked her these questions. "It's really very simple," she finally said. "I loved those boys."<sup>7</sup>

This story of a nameless woman who is healed by the touch of the Master's robe is a reminder that the kingdom of God does not endorse powerlessness. It is just a story of a different kind of power – a dynamic, revolutionary force that dismantles and reverses the normal laws of human interaction. This story reminds us that, in God's kingdom, power helps the weak, not the strong. It reminds us that, in God's kingdom, power never manipulates, but only invites us in. It reminds us that, in God's kingdom, those with power are always willing to risk their own comfort and privilege for the well-being of others. Perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that, in God's kingdom, power and love are basically the same thing.

When the world asks us what we think of power, and how we think power should be used in this world, may our answer begin with "Well, there was this teacher..." And may we, like this humble woman, reach out our own hands to take hold of the garment of Jesus, that we too might feel the blessed rush of his heavenly, life-giving power.

**Amen.**

---

<sup>6</sup> See 1 Corinthians 13.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *Chicken Soup for the Soul- 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit* (Deerfield Beach, FL: HealthCommunications, 1993), 3-4.