



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

God Wants Everyone To Be Empowered

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

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The Scripture passages we have just read express two of the many distortions about power. One distortion - burnout, is the temptation to think that only I can do the work that I see before me. The second distortion of power is discrimination, which leads to oppression, the temptation to think that only my kind or my tribe should do the work I see before me.

The first major leader of the historic Jewish community, Moses is about to burn out with all the needs coming toward him. God says, "No problem, Moses. I'll simply share the power I've given to you with a lot of other people. And by the way, I wish that all the people would receive this sacred power." You see, my friends, it is a lie to think that everything is on my shoulders, on your shoulders. Look around. God has a community of empowered people to help with the tasks at hand.

Since no one in this congregation deals with burnout in their own lives (smirk), I want to take the rest of this sermon to address the second distortion. I want to get into how power can be abusive when there is discrimination and oppression. So I start with a story.

Last month, *The New York Times Magazine* one Sunday was exclusively dedicated to some disturbing reports about the status of women in the world. The central article was an excerpt from a new book by husband and wife authors, Sheryl WuDunn and Nicholas D. Kristof. The title of their new book is **HALF THE SKY; Turning Oppression Into Opportunity For Women Worldwide**. The book title is taken from an ancient Chinese proverb that says, "Women hold up half the sky."

There is a specific piece that the article reports about on the daily slaughter of girls in the developing world. The numbers are indeed alarming in that they show that what the authors call, "Gendercide," the daily slaughter of girls in the developing world, "steals more lives in any given decade than all the genocides of the 20th century." Kristof and WuDunn, whose coverage of China for *The New York Times* won them a [Pulitzer Prize](#), declare the global struggle for women's equality "the paramount moral challenge" of our era."

Also in the magazine was a story about a young girl in Afghanistan.

In the heart of the Taliban on the outskirts of Kandahar, Afghanistan there is a school for girls, Mirwais Mena School for Girls, near the hometown of Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban's founder.

On Nov. 12 of last year, as some of the students (all girls) were walking to school, several men came on three motorcycles, each one carrying a driver and a man on back. They all wore masks. Each of the men riding on back carried a small container filled with battery acid. The masked men circled for several minutes as the girls streamed to school. Then they moved in.

Shamsia Husseini and her sister, Atifa, were walking along the highway. Shamsia, then 17, was wearing a black scarf that covered most of her face. Shamsia had seen Taliban gunmen before and figured the men on the motorcycles would pass. Then one of the bikes pulled alongside her, and the man on back jumped off. Through the mask, he asked Shamsia what seemed like a strange question. “Are you going to school?”

The masked man pulled the scarf away from Shamsia’s face and, with his other hand, pumped the trigger on his spray gun. Shamsia felt as if her face and eyes were on fire. As she screamed, the masked man reached for Atifa, who was already running. He pulled at her and tore her scarf away and pumped the spray into her back. The men sped off toward another group of girls. Shamsia lay in the street holding her burning face.

DEXTER FILKINS, “A School Bus for Shamsia,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 23, 2009

The journalist who wrote this article about this event, Dexter Filkins, said, “While few things have improved 8 years after the Americans invaded Afghanistan, “there is one unambiguously positive change that the American-led enterprise has brought. It is the education of girls. In 2001, only a million Afghan children were enrolled in school, all of them boys not one girl in 2001. The education of girls was banned. Today, approximately 7 million Afghan children attend school, of which 2.6 million, or roughly a third, are girls.”

DEXTER FILKINS, “A School Bus for Shamsia,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 23, 2009

This is not a sermon about Afghanistan, or even about women per se. It is, however, a sermon about the power of God’s Spirit to work in every human being and the wrongheaded, wronghearted, and destructive efforts to control God’s power and to try to limit it only to my kind of people—whether it’s men, or Christians, or white folks, or straight folks.

There is a stunning testimony to the power of God’s spirit in this school for girls today. Predictably the school closed after the acid attacks, but only for a week. In just a few months it was crowded and filled with the laughter of 300 girls. Nearly all of the 11 girls and four teachers who were burned by acid that morning had returned. Most surprising was Shamsia Husseini. She was not only in attendance at the school again, but animated and lively, seated in the front row of her geography class. A scarlet scar, the size of a tennis ball, still covering her face.

So when Dexter Filkins, the reporter, asked about her return to school she exhibited a perfect grasp of the situation, both hers and her country’s: “The people who did this to me don’t want women to be educated. They want us to be stupid things.”

Mahmood Qadari, the headmaster of Shamsia’s school expressed the point I want to make in this sermon. The headmaster had shuttered the school after the acid attack, but after

a few days girls started showing up, sent by their parents. Why is the school closed, the girls asked? When do classes begin? Qadari went to the leaders of Kandahar Province and secured promises for a school bus, a team of police officers and a walkway over the national highway outside. Then he called a meeting of the parents of the school for girls. Send your girls back, he told them. "I told them, *if you don't send your daughters to school, then the enemy wins,*" Qadari told me. "I told them *not to give in to darkness.*" (emphasis added)

Now money has been collected by the journalist who reported this story. Efforts are being made to have corrective surgery for Shamsia's face. And a school bus has been purchased so that the students for the school for girls can be brought to school without fear that Taliban supported men will harass them or do even worse deeds to them on their daily walk to school.

The first lesson read this morning was about Moses needing to share God's power with others so that the work of God could be done in community and by community and not by Moses alone. No Lone Ranger mentality here. Those who were inside the tent where the power-sharing ordination took place received God's power, but some were upset because God's power was shared not only with those *inside* their tent, but also with Eldad and Medad, two men who were *outside* the tent. (Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29) God's Spirit will not be contained inside anyone's tent, especially when it is a tent of discrimination, exclusion, sectionalism, or tribalism. This was the same effort to control God's power that we see in some of Jesus's disciples in the gospel lesson this morning. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not one of us." Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be soon afterwards be able to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 9: 38ff)

These passages of scripture have had instructive power for people throughout the ages, because in every age including ours there have been people in power who want to restrict the empowerment of some group of people or some class of people. But God's power cannot be cordoned off for just a few. God's power is in every human heart. And those who want to see the world through God's eyes, not through the eyes of the power of the world agree with Jesus and with Moses: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on all of them!" (Numbers 11:29)

That is not only the priesthood of all believers, but the prophethood of all believers. Even more radically it is the spirithood of all believers, and the divine empowerment of all people. God dwells in every human heart and that indwelling of God is God's power calling to every human being to be free and in turn to help free others.

Every great leader has recognized that in order for there to be a breakthrough in their time against the evils of institutional oppression and discrimination, there had to be a claiming of personal power that is given to every human being and is placed in every human heart – personal power.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., not long before his assassination spoke of this divine power.

He said, "Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, self-affirmation is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery. No Lincolnian Emancipation Proclamation or Johnsonian Civil Rights Bill can totally bring this kind of freedom." In using language we don't use these days he said, "the Negro will only be free when he reaches down to the inner depths of [one's] his own being and signs with the pen and ink of assertive [personhood] his own Emancipation Proclamation." Every person in this room has to sign his or her own Emancipation Proclamation. "And, with a spirit straining toward true self-esteem, everyone must throw off the manacles of self-abnegation and say to ourselves and to the world, "I am somebody. I am a person. I am a person with dignity and honor no matter what you say."

Then he talked about one of the great problems of history is that "the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites - polar opposites so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love."

He said, "No, what is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout "White Power!" - when nobody will shout "Black Power!" - but everybody will talk about God's power and human power.

Martin Luther King, "Where do we go from here?" This address was made to the Tenth Anniversary Convention of the S.C.L.C. in Atlanta on August 16, 1967. Dr. King projected in it the issues which led to Poor People's March on Washington. (From: Foner, Philip S.; THE VOICE OF BLACK AMERICA; New York, 1972)

There is an interesting fiction that I have passed on even in this pulpit in the past and I'm going to correct it now. It's an untruth that has circulated on the internet having to do with Nelson Mandela. It is not the case that when he was inaugurated president of South Africa in 1994 in his Inaugural Speech Nelson Mandela said the words I am about to quote to you. This quotation about the point of this sermon, power, actually come from Marianne Williamson. I have in the past attributed them to Mr. Mandela. They are important words, illustrating the point I want to make. It was a great story while we were telling it. But this sermon is in part about the empowerment of women, even more important that we give credit where credit is due. These important words come from the pen of our sister, Marianne Williamson.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I, to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? You are a Child of God. Your playing small does not serve the World. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking, so that other people won't feel insecure around you. *You were born to make manifest the Glory of God that is within you.* The glory of God is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as

we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." (Marianne Williamson, *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*)

My friends, the reason All Saints Church exists is to help us become aware in each of our hearts the very power of God that is there for each one of us and then to band together in action to make sure that those who do not yet have the freedom to exercise their God-given power will have our solidarity in accessing, and expressing that freedom. All Saints' history is about this church standing in solidarity with those interned in Japanese-American Concentration camps. All Saints history is about this church standing in solidarity with those who are of color. This church is about standing in solidarity with women, with gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, with immigrants, with those who are poor, homeless, sick, in prison. That is what this Celebration of Ministries Sunday is all about. Please go out to these tables on the lawn today and thank and praise God for all the people who have given birth to over 125 ministries of empowerment in this church.

They are staffed not by the rector or the rector's staff, but by the people of this parish who have heard God say to them with a deep and audible voice, "You were born to make manifest the Glory of God that is within you. It is not in just in some of us; the glory of God is in everyone of us. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." "You must reach down to the inner depths of your own being and sign with the pen and ink of assertive [personhood] your own Emancipation Proclamation." "If you don't send your daughters to school when the Taliban says they shouldn't go, then the enemy wins. Do not to give in to darkness."

In closing, I like to think that all of us who come to this church get a lot of help in the vein of other healthy self-help groups. But the difference in healthy self-help groups and a healthy church is this. Accessing my own personal power is not the end-goal. It is a benefit to be experienced on the way to the main thing. The main thing is divine power in *all* of its beauty. There is no greater power than the power that is within you that is greater than the power that is in the world. But that is only part of the beauty of the divine power within you. The ultimate reason God has given you that power is so that in turn, acting on the intrinsically moral value of *solidarity*, you will help empower those in this world like Shamsia, or anyone else who is the victim of discrimination, oppression, injustice, and violence just because they do not belong to the group who is exercising worldly power in the moment. Once you and I access our power within we are almost in gear. Being *fully* alive, being *fully* ourselves is then standing as an advocate for a brother or a sister or a child who needs empowerment.

Amen.