

# “Power Play”

a sermon by

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The book of Acts contains some of scripture's most remarkable stories. Were you to be compelled to choose the most amazing part of this book, you might have a pretty hard time- there are many to choose from. There is the appearance of the risen Christ and the accounts of the ascension and of Pentecost. There's the martyrdom of Stephen and journeys of Philip. There's the conversion of Saul and the accounts of all his travels and work as Paul the apostle. The book is filled with stories of miracles and healings, travels, and divine intervention. It is quite a drama.

But there's another story here, hidden under a lot of the visible drama, and it is something even more remarkable, I think, than what I've just mentioned. In the book of Acts, we witness one of the most extraordinary transformations ever. As Luke recounts the story of the development of Christianity, following the disciples in the time after Jesus' resurrection, something amazing becomes clear.

Whereas, while the disciples were certainly dedicated to Jesus during his life, they were also what we might call lukewarm. In general, their hearts were in the right place, but oftentimes their actions and words just fell a bit short of the mark. They were, by all accounts, pretty regular people, trying to be good, but faltering at the most important of moments. Peter was a great example of this. He just never seemed to get it in the gospel accounts, and at the end of Jesus' life, he denied him not once, but three times.

But in the book of Acts, we find changed disciples. Following the resurrection of Jesus, which they witnessed, the disciples found a strength and a commitment that had, to that point, been missing. Far from abandoning him after death as they had done in his life, the disciples embraced and carried Jesus' message and ministry, risking their well-being and their very lives to do so.

When we read Acts after reading the gospels, we might find ourselves scratching our heads in wonder at these motivated, confident, seemingly fearless men who speak and inspire and bring healing to the masses, despite the fact that the local authorities are breathing down their necks.

These can't be the same people, can they? What has gotten into them?

Our answer is in the first chapter of Acts. Luke begins this book with the account of Christ's ascension, and as he is speaking to the disciples following his forty days in their midst,

he tells them that they *will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon [them] and [they] will be [his] witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

What they did next, then, the organizing and preaching and teaching and healing, had almost nothing to do with them and everything to do with God. This newfound passion and strength were not the result of some self-help program they enrolled in, not an act of will, but a gift of God, through the Spirit.

And so it was that when they encountered the angry authorities, as they did in this morning's passage, they were able to endure the imprisonment and interrogation and remain strong, not because of their own power, but because of the power of God at work in them.

I don't know what it is about us humans, but we have always been intrigued by, and even obsessed with power. It is a real and inescapable part of our lives. For us, as theologian Dan Migliore writes, "experiences of both power and weakness, and along with them the question of God, are woven into the fabric of life. . . . To be human is to have some power, to be able to do something, to reach a goal, to make a difference in the world. There is no life where there is no power."<sup>1</sup>

This is a natural and acceptable reality, one we would be foolish to ignore or overlook, but it has its dangers. In some cases, power is a matter of survival- for much of human history, the ones with power were the ones who ate better and lived longer. In our world, we need power structures to maintain order, keep peace and make sense of our lives. But in cases where survival isn't at stake, the pursuit of power can have as its driving force a desire for control and status, the need to be right, to be feared, to be admired, and none of these things has anything at all to do with the lives we are called by God to lead.

As humans, we have a different understanding of power than that which our God has. Our understanding of power is limited in comparison to power as exercised by God. For the one whose power was made perfect in weakness, power of a physical, financial, military or coercive sort is not power at all. But we humans have a consistent track record of not getting that.

And so, when Peter and John were imprisoned in Jerusalem and hauled up in front of the priestly leaders over their proclamation of the Gospel, the question put to them was not why or how have you done what you've done, but rather, *by what power or by what name did you do this?*

Those in a position of power were less interested in the details of what they'd done and more interested in the power behind their actions. In other words, the leaders wanted to know not how they had gathered such large crowds, teaching and converting and healing them, but under whose authority they had done these things.

As one commentator notes, "Rulers generally assume that they control the instruments and symbols of power, so they are shocked when power appears to be emanating from ones so lowly as Peter and John."<sup>2</sup> Peter's answer was clear and honest, and as Luke reminds us, filled with the Holy Spirit. It was Jesus of Nazareth, and none other, who empowered these men to do what they did.

The renewed, Spirit-given vigor for Jesus Christ and His teaching, shown by the disciples, did not sit well with the authorities, and that was very dangerous. The disciples were taking huge risks, going against the religious powers of the day. But it was working. According to Luke, thousands were professing faith in Christ as a result of the work of the disciples. What

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts*, in *Interpretation*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1998), p.49.

had just recently been a small movement, made up of a ragtag assortment of men, had very quickly become a force to be reckoned with, the beginnings of a new religion.

This text is full of power, speaking of the conflict between human and divine authority, and highlighting the importance of standing up for what is right, even at the risk of personal hardship and injury. But we misread it if we take it as a free pass to bully our way past all authority, criticizing, condemning or resisting anyone in power with whom we happen to disagree.

Scripture is full of examples of ordinary humans taking extraordinary steps to resist unjust and improper exercises of authority. Moses stood up to Pharaoh and Jesus clashed with Jewish and Roman authority. Depending upon how we read Scripture, we might assume that it is our responsibility as people of faith to resist any earthly authority for the sake of the Lord. This is a challenging concept. We know that we are to submit our lives to the Lord, but we also know that we live in a human world, governed by human authority. We do not always agree on how things ought to be done in our homes, our workplaces, our churches, our city or our nation.

But what constitutes a breach of authority that warrants our wholehearted resistance? How are we to know when and how to confront the powers of our day?

In our world, unfortunately, conflict seems to be a given, and people often relish the opportunity to disagree with those in power, to lob potshots at them and try to discredit them. Respect for authority seems to be at an all time low. It is not uncommon for those in leadership positions- no matter what level- to be criticized and even demonized for their beliefs and actions.

Accountability for those in power is important, as is each individual's right to their beliefs. But we must make a distinction between resisting the authority of others because we disagree with their views or positions and challenging authority that goes against God's will as we understand it through the Spirit.

What the disciples did in the early days of the church is not the same as us angrily throwing verbal stones at a politician over his or her views on particular issues. Resisting authority that sought to contain or quash the spreading of the gospel cannot be equated to boycotting an organization because its leadership goes in a direction different from the one I would choose. Our power, and our response to the exercise of power, must be guided by the Holy Spirit, and aimed toward God's kingdom, in order for it to be legitimately used.

In 2002, long before our current economic situation was even dreamed of, but in an eerie foreshadowing of what we would come to face a few years later, a woman named Sherron Watkins was living in Houston, working for Enron, then the nation's seventh-largest company. She was a high-paid executive who enjoyed a very comfortable lifestyle and all the perks of her position. And so, when in her work she uncovered some significant accounting problems which made her fear for the company's solvency, she took an enormous risk by bringing those concerns to the company CEO. To her dismay, nothing was done about what she described as "an elaborate accounting hoax."

Watkins, an active member of First Presbyterian Church in Houston, knew that what was happening at her company was wrong, and even if those in the highest positions of authority were willing to go along with it, she could not. She became the whistle-blower for one of the largest corporate scandals in recent history. And in so doing, she faced pressure and challenges the likes of which most of us can only imagine. Watkins was demoted and stripped of many of the perks she had enjoyed. She later learned that the company had begun taking steps toward her termination as retribution for her actions. Whereas she understood what she was doing to be in

keeping with “the code of conduct, the vision and the values” of her company, she came to see that those in power saw it differently.

Though no one can question that what she did was right, Watkins admits that it was very difficult. She said, “there were some very bleak moments throughout when you’re just so disappointed with human nature, with the power of greed and the power of denial, trying to rationalize that you’ve done nothing wrong.”

Looking back on it these years later, Watkins, who resigned from Enron in 2002, says that she, “found God through the Enron debacle.” She had always been a Christian, she says, but never knew real freedom until that experience. Through the challenges she faced in speaking truth to power, in standing up for what is right despite the very real, very great financial and personal risks, Watkins’ faith “was sharpened,” in the words of her pastor.<sup>3</sup>

She now speaks to companies and groups, encouraging people to support and practice ethical leadership. She is open and honest about her faith and its role in her professional life, saying, “To find a life supplied with one grace after another, spiritual blessing upon spiritual blessing, favor upon favor and gift heaped upon gift; we just need to do one thing – act on our faith. Don’t let your faith be wishful thinking, do something with it that requires courage.”<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes the courage our faith requires involves standing up to power wielded in an improper manner. And sometimes it involves following a leader even if we don’t agree with them. Power is a very real part of our lives and our world. It is not, in and of itself, an evil thing. However, when exercised out of selfish or careless motives, it has the potential to be quite damaging.

As people of faith, we have a responsibility to understand human power in its proper context. We must abide by and live within the power structures of our society, but we must also be prepared to resist when those powers contradict the ultimate power of our lives- God.

We don’t need to become anarchists or to separate ourselves from any power structure with which we disagree, nor do we need to sit idly by in fear as persons in authority break the law, commit injustice, or violate God’s will as we understand it. It is not an easy thing, living as people accountable both to human and to divine authority. It can get quite confusing. But there is a way for us to navigate this rocky road.

As Christ promised at his ascension, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and others on the day of Pentecost. It was this power, the power of God as revealed to us in the flesh of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, that enabled Peter and John and many others after them to resist the human powers that would have kept them silent. But the power of the Holy Spirit also guided them in their resistance, ensuring that what they did, they did for the upbuilding of God’s kingdom, and not their own egos.

In this life, we will never fully understand the dynamics of power as they play out from day to day. All we can do- what we must do- is commit ourselves to living a life that seeks first the authority and the kingdom of God. We do this by acknowledging God, and God alone, as the primary power in our lives, by worshiping Him, studying His Word, and being in fellowship with others on this journey. We cannot do this alone.

Seeking to follow Christ, led by the Holy Spirit, we will find that we have the strength to speak truth to power, to follow as we are led, and to proclaim that the ultimate power in our lives and in the world belongs not to any human being, but only to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Jodie Morse and Amanda Bower, “The Party Crasher,” *Time*, December 22, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> [www.sherronwatkins.com](http://www.sherronwatkins.com)