

“Transforming the World: Power”
Acts 2:1-12

Today we begin a sermon series with the theme of transforming the world. Transforming lives” is part of our mission statement as a congregation. It is the very reason we believe that we exist as a church. Yet, we know that transformation is not an easy thing. It is ultimately the work of God’s Spirit in and around us which we often resist because we don’t like change. The transformation of the world is not about us going out with the mission of changing others. The transformation of the world is heavily dependent on us being transformed. That is what happened to the disciples on Pentecost. Their mission to transform the world began when they themselves were transformed. So during this sermon series, we will explore areas in our lives and in our world that are in need of transformation to see how we can become more open to the work of the Spirit. Today’s focus is on power.

Our sense or understanding of power as human beings is often not aligned with God’s vision of power. It is one of the areas in our lives where we totally miss the mark. Power is so alluring to us because it promises us happiness and success according to the norms of the world. Most of us believe that if we have power, we would use it for good, but the problem is that in the process of seeking or asserting power, we often end up being deceived to believe that power is about control, coercion, might, or violence. Obvious examples of such power are world or political leaders who might start out seeking power so that they could help others, but who often end up using their power to glorify themselves. Power becomes an idol that they serve. Here is a clip from Star Trek about power.

<https://youtu.be/WI4WLHZNfmo>

So if power corrupts, are we doomed to never be transformed? Are we doomed as human beings to abuse power and to seek coercive/controlling power as a way to happiness? Father Thomas Keating talked about power as one of the emotional programs for happiness which we develop as children. It is basically about believing the illusion that if we have power, we are going to be happy. It is also unconscious and deeply embedded in your being. You realize it only when you pay attention to your attachments and aversions. He says, the problem with [thinking that holding on to power/control] will help you find happiness is that you’re only competing with millions of people in the world. According to Jim Osterhaus, the myth in our emotions and minds is that “the world is a threatening place, and the only way I can feel safe is if I control every situation and the people around me.” On the positive side, this kind of thinking leads people “to have strong leadership qualities. They are vigilant, highly organized, and have high expectations of themselves.” On the negative side, “People with this issue often wall themselves off emotionally. They do not let others get too close to them. They can be overly controlling of others - bossy, directive, demanding, rigid, and nitpicky. They impose perfectionist demands on others. They become anxious whenever anyone or anything threatens their control.”

Yet, the good news of faith for today is that we are not doomed to live that way forever. The story of Pentecost is about our possible transformation through a different kind of

power. The world of the disciples was grim. The illusion of coercive power was looming large in their lives. They had waited in Jerusalem after their leader was gone from them. All their hopes were decimated because all the powers which Jesus resisted were still in place. The Roman Empire was not defeated. The corrupt religious leaders were still in place. The people who were oppressed were still suffering. It seemed that the powers of the world had won over the power of God's goodness as they saw it in Jesus Christ. But somehow in the midst of all of this mess, the disciples received a power that transformed and pushed them beyond the limits of their ordinary understanding and experiences of power (read story from Acts 2:1-12 screen). The believers were gathered in Jerusalem for one of their usual religious festivals in a world that was heavily divided by culture, ethnicity, class, gender, language, and religion. They were hiding in an upper room because of their fear. But all the boundaries that had divided people from one another were broken down and they were able to communicate with one another without any barriers. They were the same people as they were before. It was the same world they lived in, but everything was different from that moment on because their whole vision of life and faith was transformed. They knew that despite all the pain and brokenness of their world, there was a greater power for healing and justice at work in their lives. They knew that they had to proclaim and live out this vision which Christ bestowed upon them through the power of the Spirit. Now the people around them did not see it the same way. They were asking, "What's gotten into them?" "What does this mean?" And some of them even said that they were drunk. The people who were watching the same events take place could not see what was truly happening to the disciples because their vision was limited to the "normal" standards of the world. They were still seeing the world the same way they always saw it. The power of the festival of the Holy Spirit did not touch their lives. The transforming power of God's Spirit is not coercive and that is why the people who were not open to it, did not understand. They were closed to it.

In the same way, the choice is before us. We can continue to believe in and follow the powers of the world or we can open our hearts to the power of the Spirit. We can live pursuing the illusion that control can really bring us happiness, or we can open ourselves to the process of transformation. This is not about living an easier life, but it is about living with a deeper sense of peace and purpose in the world. The disciples were transformed from being followers to becoming Apostles, those who are sent into the world to live out their mission. And the key to all of that transformation was their active prayer life.

No matter where you are on the spectrum of power, whether you exercise power over others or you feel helpless under the power of others, the invitation and path to transformation is the same. Let the Spirit of God into your own heart and allow that Spirit to dwell within you day in and day out.

(first service) I would like to end with a scene from the movie "Saving Private Ryan," when Capt. John Miller (Tom Hanks) helps bring back the focus of his men to their ultimate mission of returning home. The story of the movie is Captain John Miller (Hanks) takes his men behind enemy lines to find Private James Ryan, whose three brothers have been killed in combat. Surrounded by the brutal realities of war, while searching for Ryan, each man embarks upon a personal journey to discover his own

strength to triumph over an uncertain future with honor, decency and courage. In this scene, the men were filled with fear and anxiety because their leader, Captain Miller, released a German soldier instead of killing him. They did not trust his leadership anymore. The emotional program for happiness here was control. Capt. Miller helped them get back in touch with their dreams and visions. When one of them was ready to abandon the mission of finding Private Ryan by using their weapons against each other, their captain helps them get in touch with something much deeper than their fears and struggle for power. He does not try to assert his power over them. Instead, he calls out the power that is already within them.

<https://youtu.be/LvAIBDGIYE0>

Another example of the power of the Spirit instead of the powers of control and coercion comes from the newsletter sent to us by Elmarie and Scott Parker, our associates for Ecumenical Partnerships in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Here is what they had to say, "A man from another religious background shared with us his encounter with Christ's call through the Sermon on the Mount to love one's enemies. Tired of war and the rhetoric of hate, the thought of following someone who teaches those who have ears to hear to love enemies rather than kill and destroy them has been like a drink of cool, fresh water on a hot day to this man. He is one of hundreds who are coming to churches across Iraq wanting to learn more about following Jesus who calls people to love of the enemy rather than hatred and fear of the enemy. Hope made visible. In another conversation, a woman shared with us their visit with incarcerated wives of ISIS fighters. These women were shocked and overwhelmed that Christian women would choose to come and visit them, serving them by bringing the hygiene and food items otherwise denied to them, taking time to sit and listen to them and pray with them. 'How could this be that Christians forced out of their homes by some of these women's husbands are now visiting with us and treating us with kindness?' This is the question they asked their visitors. How did these Christian women respond? 'The love of God for us and for you compels us to come ---we cannot but come to you.' Hope made visible!"

This turned out to be a turning point for his men. They were transformed from being fearful to claiming the power of the dreams within them as human beings. In a way, that is the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It rekindles the fire of love within our hearts. It helps us move from fear to love, from grasping to trusting, and from violence to peace. Sometimes, this happens in big ways, but most of the time, it happens gradually and without much fanfare. May we always be open to the power of the Spirit within and around us! Amen.

(For second service) A few years ago, I heard an interview with author Brian O'Dea, author of *High: Confessions of a Drug Dealer*. His book is a memoir of dealing drugs, doing time and of redemption. During the interview, listeners called in with comments and questions. One caller shared that he wanted to break his own addiction to drugs, but that the 12 Step program didn't work for him. He objected to the step where you admit there is a higher power than you, and that you are powerless in the face of your addiction. The caller insisted: "I'm not powerless. And I don't believe in God." The author answered this way: "Every time you take the drug to alter your consciousness, you are admitting there is a higher power, and that you don't control it. The 12-step

program is to help you consciously admit that, so you can give it up to the higher power.”

In a way, that is the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It transforms our experience and sense of power. It helps us move from fear to love, from grasping to trusting, and from violence to peace. Sometimes, this happens in big ways, but most of the time, it happens gradually and without much fanfare. But no matter how it happens, may we always be open to the power of the Spirit within and around us! Amen.