

Clackamas United Church of Christ
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Sermon 1.27.19

The Power of the Left Hand of God

Power is a tricky thing, isn't it?

I turned 40 a few weeks ago. For my birthday celebration, my brothers invited me over to one of their houses and we watched an episode of the "Lord of the Rings." Because 3 hours of hobbits, dwarves, and elves walking from place to place is our definition of a good time!

One of the fascinating things about that story is that whoever puts on the ring of power becomes corrupt. Power begins to erode the soul and soon you become this almost non-human Gollum like creature.

And yet, in our passage from the Gospel of Luke we hear that, "... Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone."

Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit.

Christian tradition tells us that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit in a radical way. Not so much in a new way, but the most fundamental way. It's as if the Spirit and Jesus were one. When you looked at Jesus, you were looking not just at the Spirit, but at the power of God's Spirit.

But, as the Lord of the Rings teaches us, we know that power is more than just tricky; it's dangerous. The old statement that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" is a bit of a cliché, but it's a cliché because it tends to be true.

And yet Jesus was filled with the most powerful essence in the world – the Spirit of God – but it didn't corrupt him.

How do we make sense of this power?

There was a great spiritual writer of the 20th century named Robert Farrar Capon. He used a metaphor that I find helpful with the topic of power.¹

In his book, [*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*](#), Capon talks about the "Right hand of God" and the "Left hand of God." Have you heard the phrase the "Right hand of God" before? You have

¹ I first heard this on Rob Bell's podcast *The RobCast* episode 211, "[Jesus H. Christ: Part 2: Hammers and Smells.](#)"

probably never heard of the Left hand of God because the Left hand of God gets ignored. How many of you are left handed? ...You basically get ignored. Sorry about that...

Right handed power is the power to exert our will over another. It's the power to dominate. And it leads us to be against others. Sometimes the Bible depicts God as using right handed power in extremely violent ways. And history is full of people using right handed power in extremely violent ways, too. Right handed power is the kind of power that often leads to corruption.

Despite this, right handed power often has a good stated desire underneath it. On a political level right handed power often states that it wants peace or security or even justice, but right handed typically uses violence against someone it perceives as a threat or an enemy.

In religious terms, the goal of right-handed power is often holiness or a sense of the sacred. And in order to achieve holiness, right handed power thinks God wants us to sacrifice, exclude, or banish someone who is an impure threat to holiness.

Right handed power tends to see these threats everywhere. And it thinks that the best method to achieve peace and security, or holiness and the sacred, is to exert its will and dominance over others. Others need to be killed, excluded, banished, or sacrificed in the name of peace, security, and holiness – and often people think that when they kill, exclude, banish or sacrifice another, they are guided by the power of the Spirit.

We see this tendency to right handed power in the Bible. For example, our first passage today is from the Ezra and Nehemiah story. Ezra was one of the important religious leaders of his day. He talks about the Law. He claimed that the day was holy to the Lord and the Law was there to help us find joy and strength in the Lord. But this was not the first time Ezra talked about the law. Before we get to the previous time he talks about the law, I need to back up and do a little history with you. Now if you get nightmares of your high school history class, I want to invite you to stick with me here...

Historically, this passage where Ezra speaks comes just after the Babylonian Empire used right handed power to destroy the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. They killed many people living in Jerusalem and then forced the religious, economic, and political elite into exile throughout their empire. But they allowed the poor and the marginalized to stay in Jerusalem. In addition, the Babylonians had a policy of forcing women they conquered in one nation to go to other nations as foreigners. This created at least two consequences. First, women felt like they were strangers in new lands. Second, it led to intermarriage with native men.

The Persian Empire defeated the Babylonian Empire about 50 years later. The Persians allowed Jewish exiles to return home to rebuild their cities and their temples. So those who were in exile returned to Jerusalem. They were all very excited to return to their homeland for a fresh start.

Many who returned, including Ezra and Nehemiah, thought that the law of God demanded holiness and purity. And guess what they did to achieve that purity? They used right handed power. The last chapter of the book of Ezra tells the story about how they forced all the foreign wives and their children into exile.

Interestingly, the story points out a small detail. It rained hard that day. It was a policy of family separation that brought tears, pain, and heartache to men, women, and children. Just like the Babylonian Empire sent Jewish elite into exile, now the leaders of the Jewish community sent foreigner women and children into exile – all in the name of the Spirit of God.

If this vision that demands holiness by excluding people with right handed power was all we had to go on in the Bible, it would be awful. But there's an alternative vision of holiness in the Bible that is achieved with Left handed power. For example, there is a law in the book of Leviticus that says, "You must treat the foreigner living among you as a native-born and love them as yourself." Ezra chose to ignore that law.

The book of Isaiah is another good example of this kind of left-handed power. A major theme in Isaiah is that there will come a time when other nations would come to Israel. Foreigners would come to worship God. Isaiah's hope was that all people would be welcomed into the family of God.

And Isaiah's vision was coming true as foreign women were coming and marrying Jewish men! For Isaiah, this was a sign that God's realm manifesting on earth. The power of the Spirit was not seen as right-handed domination. God's power was not against foreigners or policies of family separation. Rather, God's power was more left-handed. It was a power that was *with* foreigners.

And that's the fundamental difference between right-handed power and left-handed power. Right handed power is the power to be *against* another. Left handed power is the power to be *with and for* another.

Isaiah ends with a note of despair. What should have been hope and joy and love of returning from exile, turned out to bitter disappointment. All because the leaders were consumed with fear of losing holiness. And their emphasis on holiness led them to unite against foreign women and their children.

And then there was Jesus, who was filled with the power of the Spirit of God. Is the power of the Spirit of God a power that leads to separating families in the name of holiness and security, or does the power of the Spirit lead us to look more like Isaiah and invite all people into our community?

Jesus reveals that the power of the Spirit is left handed. It is the power to be *with and for* those who are poor, oppressed, imprisoned – those who suffer injustice. Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me

to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

That summarizes Jesus mission statement. And it fulfills the mission we have as God's people. But if I were in the congregation that day 2,000 years ago listening to Jesus, I might protest. I would want some right-handed power and say, "That's all well and good, Jesus, but what about the part where God comes in power and vengeance to destroy our enemies. Isn't that how God sets things right? What about God's right-handed power?"

This is where the metaphor of right-handed power and left-handed power breaks down. Because according to Jesus, God only has left handed power. For as the First Letter of John states, Jesus finally revealed that God is Love. The power of the Spirit does not use the law as an excuse to divide the world into us against them, who is pure and impure, who is included and excluded. The power of the Spirit leads us to work for a world of unity where our mentality is us *with* them. Because in reality, there is only us.

But make no mistake, God's love and left-handed power does not sit back and just let oppression happen. Left-handed power is not weak and passive. It is strong, courageous, and determined in its pursuit of love and justice. As Jesus reveals, the power of the Spirit actively seeks to let the oppressed go free and to care for the poor.

And it does so through determined nonviolent action. Jesus didn't seek to destroy his enemies; rather, he sought to transform political, economic, and religious systems that were bad news for the poor and that led to oppression. The power of the Spirit leads us to transform these systems, not through violence against individuals, but through acts of nonviolence in pursuit of justice.

Martin Luther King was probably the best example of this left-handed power, the power of the Spirit of God, during the 20th century. Maybe our greatest example of this now is the Rev. Dr. William Barber.

Rev. Barber has revitalized King's Poor People's Campaign. Barber is uniting white and black and brown people on a mission that seeks a more just world for poor people. In doing so, he is delivering good news for the poor.

Rev. Barber recently [wrote](#), "If Trump can find \$7 billion for an imagined emergency, why can't he find money for real emergencies? 40 million Americans still without insurance, 62 million working for less than a living wage, 11 million living in the shadows, 4 million who can't buy unleaded water for their homes." [And](#), "We must challenge ALL leaders--in our statehouses, places of worship, and communities--who pay lip service to Dr. King and our constitutional values yet support laws that contradict them..."

The problems of our time are bigger than any one politician or religious leader. As Rev. Barber says, we must challenge all leaders who distract us by dividing the world into us and them with imagined crises and emergencies so that we can help solve real crises and emergencies.

As followers of Jesus, our mission looks like his mission. It is to work for a more just world, not by uniting against a common enemy, but by the power of the Spirit that guides us in the way of nonviolence, love, and justice for all people.

May we be guided by the power of the Spirit this day and forever more. Amen.