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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 5, 2024

6 Easter, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 10:44-48](#)

[Psalm 98](#)

[1 John 5:1-6](#)

[John 15:9-17](#)

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I wonder what you think of first when I say the word, “power”?

Maybe you think of electricity, as in “power lines” or “power plant.”

Maybe you think of special abilities, like a superhero’s powers, or a wizard with magic powers.

Maybe you think of social and political systems where people hold different kinds of power to act and make change.

Whatever kind of power comes to mind first for you, power is capacity; ability; the capacity to get something done.

And power can be good or bad. Or rather, power is a good thing, like all things in this world made by God, but can be used for good or for evil. We're often used to thinking about power as a bad thing, or at least with a healthy degree of suspicion; and no wonder, because power in our world is so often misused. "Power corrupts," the saying goes, "and absolute power corrupts absolutely." And among human beings that seems pretty often to be true. Being a monarch or a president or a CEO or any kind of leader comes with a significant degree of spiritual danger. Having the ability to make decisions and have them implemented shades very easily into taking pleasure in having people defer to you and treat you with importance and then into beginning to believe that those who defer to you are actually less important than you are.

Leadership—which in and of itself can be a good thing, an act of service provided for the good of the whole community—very quickly, among us human beings, shades into domination. Which is part of what theologians mean when they say that we live in a fallen world and that we are sinners; which is to say, among other things, that we don't seem to have the tendency, very reliably or for very long, to exercise power in ways that give life instead of stifling it.

God, of course, is powerful. Indeed God is the source of all power, all ability, all capacity to act. "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might," we sing each week at the altar. God is the one who spoke the universe into being and sustains it in existence in every millisecond. God can create or uncreate in a single sheer act of intention. If God wanted any one of us to turn into a toad or be transported to Mars or vanish out of existence as if we'd never been born, all it would take would be that single act of will and it would be.

Which, since each of us was actually born and is here in this world, might give us a little hint about how much God actually loves us and delights in us and wants us here as exactly the people we are.

Jesus came into this world bearing the power of God. And since Jesus is God in a human life, he shows us what it looks like to have power, and to use power, in ways that build up rather than break down, in the way God uses power, in the way power is meant to be used. He could have ordered his disciples to follow him. More than that, he could have ordered them to serve him. He could have used them, in the way human beings use other human beings, which is to treat them as things and not as people. He could have. But he didn't.

"I do not call you servants," he says, "but friends." Think about what it means for someone who is genuinely more powerful to genuinely be the friend of someone who is less powerful. Not to posture as their friend in a kind of false humility or an effort to self-aggrandize, but simply to be one.

And he gives them a commandment. Which at first glance might seem more like the kind of power we're used to, the human way of using power to order other people around. But this commandment isn't like most commandments. "This is my commandment," he says, "that you love one another as I have loved you." What he commands them to do is the one thing that can never be coerced. You can make someone follow you at the point of a sword. You can make them bring you a drink or a trophy or a scepter. But you just can't force another human being to love you or anyone else. Love doesn't work that way. The only power to make someone else love is the power of example; the power of loving first.

Jesus, who is truly the boss, truly the leader, truly the Lord, comes among us as one who serves. He takes a towel and washes our feet. And then he gives us a command, which is to say: if you love me in return, the way I have loved you, then love one another; then serve.

Today is Rogation Sunday, the Sixth Sunday in Easter, when it's traditional to pray for the places we live, and especially for the earth and the harvest and the various living things that share this place with us. [After the 10:15 service/in a few minutes] we'll go in procession around our church grounds to pray and give thanks for this land and these fellow creatures. And I wonder, as we do this, what it would be like for us as human beings to exercise our power on this earth by treating all the other species that inhabit it with us, not as servants, but as friends.

We as a species hold quite a bit of power. Not absolute power, and not all the time. If you or I found ourselves alone out on a hill with an angry bear or mountain lion, we wouldn't feel like the more powerful one in the situation. But collectively, as a species, we human beings have come into a position of holding massive power to affect for good or for ill the lives of literally quintillions of other beings—yes, someone has tried to estimate it—animals and plants of all kinds on this earth, our siblings in evolution and as members of a vast interconnected system of life. And for too long and too often many of us have seen ourselves as the bosses of this earth, free to use our power to treat other species as resources to be extracted or unfortunate collateral damage. We do it in the way we farm animals for meat, dairy, and eggs; in the way we destroy habitats for our expansion; in the way we burn fuels that are irrevocably changing our climate and sending species to extinction.

What if we used our power among our fellow creatures the way Jesus uses his among us? What if we washed the feet of the earth and its plants and its animals the way Jesus washes ours? What if every decision we made about how we farm, where we live, what we wear, how we travel, how we power our lives, was made in the light of not just our own well-being but that of all creatures?

As we pray today for our gardens, for our oak tree, for the sacred earth where our beloved departed sleep, may the God who has called us friends inspire in us a deep friendship for all creation. And may it lead us to follow the commandment of Jesus, and to serve as he serves us.