

Message: “Speaking of, and to, Power”

Have you read Bishop Reuben Job’s wonderful book, *Three Simple Rules*? He outlines three rules Rev. John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist movement, asked us to live by. One of the rules is: *do no harm*.

Let’s pray it together: *I will guard my lips, my mind and my heart so I will not disparage, injure or wound another child of God. I must do no harm. Amen.*

What we say and do matters. And, contrary to the saying, the end doesn’t always justify the means. If we seek to do good, but knowingly harm someone through what we say and do, we aren’t doing good, but harm.

This is a hard truth to hear. In our desire to good as we see it, we can end up doing harm. For example, you may have heard of the Four Pests campaign in China. In the late 1950s, Mao Zedong launched a campaign to eliminate rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows to improve hygiene and protect crops.

A disaster followed. Sparrows eat seeds, but they also eat insects. With the sparrows gone, locust populations exploded, destroying crops and contributing heavily to the Great Chinese Famine, which killed tens of millions of people.

How many of you are familiar with kudzu? At one time, the U.S. government encouraged farmers to plant kudzu. They thought it would help with soil erosion and provide forage for cattle.

The result was disastrous. The climate was perfect for the vine, and it lacked natural predators. It quickly became the “vine that ate the South,” smothering millions of acres of native trees and plants under a blanket of heavy leaves. We know Paul’s frustration: the good we want to do we don’t do, and the evil we don’t want to do, we end up doing.

It doesn’t long to realize the absurdity of the human condition. Like Sisyphus in our deceit and hubris, we can find ourselves caught in the trap of endless tasks under hopeless taskmasters. The monotony of life leads us to search for meaning. The question is, “Where do we turn to find purpose and meaning in life?”

Sadly, for some, the answer is themselves. This is the take of French philosopher Albert Camus. He suggested we find freedom, purpose and even happiness by accepting life's struggles and then creating our own meaning when defeat is inevitable. This is called absurdism.

It's not the same as nihilism, which is the belief nothing matters. Absurdism says we find happiness through rebellion and defiance. Logic and evidence rule. We find joy in conflict. Camus also saw religion as an attempt to escape our fate.

How does this connect to our faith and life, much less power?

If you'll bear with me for another moment, we'll see. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argued true religious faith requires a "leap of faith" precisely where human reason and logic fail.

Faith is not a conclusion of logic. We can't reason our way to faith. Faith is stepping into the irrational and trusting God beyond what evidence can support. It's embracing the spiritual, transcendent God, even when this goes outside the bounds of what society says.

Faith isn't an escape from the reality of life and suffering, the world as we know it. It's not about fear of the unknown. Faith is embracing something, and Someone, greater. It's a truth which resonates in our inner being. We know when we are loved or in love by what we feel and experience, not by someone measuring our endorphin levels.

It comes down to living with uncertainty. Those with faith accept the uncertainty of life and do good, do no harm and stay in love with God. Those struggling rebel and demand things to be the way they want or only accept what they can measure and analyze.

I think this is where the heart of power, the root of our faith, lies.

Paul wrote, *"Our fight is not against people on earth. We are fighting against the rulers and authorities and the powers of this world's darkness. We are fighting against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly places"* (Ephesians 6:12, CEB).

This has always been the struggle of humanity. We've struggled with power, seeking control over our household, neighborhood, community, nations and even creation. And we tend to confuse power with identity, which leads to further conflict and absurdity.

God knows this. And God responds to our human desire for power in surprising ways. Scripture is filled with narratives about how God speaks of power. Let's take a few moments to reflect on the story of four women who spoke to power through their lives.

Earlier, we read an excerpt from the book of Exodus.

Joseph, the boy with an amazing coat and overwhelming pride, overcame many challenges, such as slavery and prison. He became the right hand of Pharaoh. He prepared the country for famine. Joseph's father Jacob, his brothers and their families went to Egypt to live with him. Their generation passed and the twelve tribes continued to flourish.

Then, one day, a new king began to rule Egypt. But this Pharaoh didn't honor Joseph's memory or embrace the people. He saw them as a threat. "There are too many of them. We must make plans to stop them from growing stronger," he declared (Exodus 1:9-10).

And the Egyptians went along with it. They decided to take advantage of the immigrants. They took away their rights, put taskmasters over them and forced them to do hard work for the king.

But a strange thing happened. The harder the people worked, the more they spread and grew. And the more the Egyptians became afraid of them. So, they decided to make life even harder for the people. They forced the immigrants into manual labor. And they showed no mercy.

This is where the first two women enter the picture. They are nurses, or midwives. They are Shiphrah ("fairness") and Puah ("brilliance"). Pharaoh said to the nurses, "Go ahead and help the Hebrew women give birth. But kill all the baby boys!" You can hear the subtext... or else.

An amazing thing happened. The author tells us the two women spared the children. And they made up an excuse, telling the king the immigrant women were vigorous, so the babies were born and the family gone before they arrived. God blessed the midwives, giving them families of their own. The population kept growing and became "very strong."

Pharaoh decided to double down. He commanded the people saying, "*Throw the baby boys in the river*" (Exodus 1:22). Why just boys? Well, the king saw girls as less valuable and easier to control.

How do we understand power? Is it the ability for a leader to do what they want to do? It seems incomprehensible a leader would be so afraid of immigrants they'd recommend throwing babies in a river. And yet we lock families up in detention for months on end in terrible conditions.

Now, this was a general edict. Pharoah told his people: whenever you see a Hebrew baby boy, throw him in the river. Calling for mob action, he inflamed prejudice and suspicion, stirring everyone up with fear and threats. This is what absurdist, fearful leaders have done for millennia.

The story then shifts to a young Levite couple. They are married and she becomes pregnant. Privately, she gives birth to a baby boy and then hides him for three months. When she couldn't hide him any longer, she got a woven basket, covered it with pitch to keep the water out, and placed it in the reeds on the bank of the river Nile.

This is where two more women come into the picture. The first is the boy's older sister, who stood at a distance and watched. The second is the daughter of Pharoah, who came to the river to bathe. She saw the basket, opened it and found the baby crying.

Pharoah's daughter showed mercy. She knew the boy was Hebrew, but she adopted him on the spot. When the boy's sister asked if a wet nurse was needed, Pharoah's daughter said, "yes." And the boy's mother came and tended to him.

And Pharoah's daughter named him: Moses (mo-SHEH), which means "drawn from the water." And through Moses, God delivered the people. God brought good from evil.

Pharoah was off base from the beginning. He wanted to turn the river, a source of life, into a place of death, and it didn't work. He wanted the women, those who bring life, to be instruments of death, and it didn't work. The girl he didn't consider worthy stood sentinel over a baby in a basket, floating on the river of life, a river of hope.

This doesn't mean that what God intends for good, human beings can't turn to evil. Oh, how we wish that were true. But it does mean those who revere God with awe, as four women did, can work to foil those who would misuse the blessings of God. But only if they're willing to take the risk. If they're willing to work for life, not for death.

It also doesn't mean the women were more afraid of what God would do to them than what Pharaoh would do to them. They trusted in God's power and presence more than in Pharaoh's power and presence.

Today, our understanding of power flows from how we identify with Jesus. When we give up wondering who or what he is, and declare Jesus is the One we've been looking for, the One we need, whether we're aware of our need or not, our lives are transformed, as Paul wrote to Rome. We no longer follow the pattern of this world, but live lives of worship.

We can trust Jesus. Matthew narrates a story to show us this truth: "...the devil led Jesus to the top of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and all the wonderful things in them. The devil said, 'If you'll bow down and worship me, I'll give you all these things.'

And Jesus said to him, *'Get away from me! The Scriptures say, "You must worship the Lord your God. Serve only him!"'* (Matthew 4:8-10, ERV).

This Messiah, the One we need, is the one who comes from God, is of one essence with God, is the Son of the living God. Jesus is the one who connects, who brings together human need and divine presence. Jesus is the one who reconciles, who puts us in our brokenness back in touch with God's wholeness. He pardons and heals what was broken.

This changes things. It changes us. By identifying with Jesus, our identity is transformed. We're no longer just individual followers. We're called into a new community of faith willingly following him. We're different because Jesus is Lord. Our identity is wrapped up in the love of Christ, not by power or fear.

How will we respond to this gift? Jesus wants us to show and tell, to be the community at work in the world. Questions will follow:

"Why are you doing what you do? Why do you care about me so much? How can you be so loving?" We'll respond with the message of Jesus: "I love you and I'm with you."

We don't lead with doctrine or misuse power or rebel. We lead with the life-giving power of love. *Let us pray ...*

Exodus 1:8-14 (CEB)

Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph.

He said to his people, "The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are. Come on, let's be smart and deal with them. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land."

As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work. They had to build storage cities named Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh.

But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread. So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

More...

Romans 12:1-8 (CEB)

So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is - what is good and pleasing and mature.

Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you: don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you. We have many parts in one body, but the parts don't all have the same function. In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other. We have different gifts that are consistent with God's grace that has been given to us. If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith. If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging. The one giving should do it with no strings attached. The leader should lead with passion. The one showing mercy should be cheerful.