

A power of good

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 October 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 22B

**Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Contemporary Reading: “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver in
Wild Geese: Selected Poems; Mark: 10: 25-45**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

After I finished my first theological degree in Dunedin, in Aotearoa New Zealand, at Knox College, I went to New York to do post-graduate study at Union Theological Seminary. While at Knox I had discovered feminist theology, but not in my formal classes. Such things were not part of the curriculum there. My teachers were not fundamentalist, or even conservative. They were mainstream reformed, deeply influenced by the post-war theology of Karl Barth. My teachers were good men (and they were all men), but they were teaching theology from the centre. The margins were nowhere in their sight.

Arriving at Union in the late summer of 1983, I was over-awed and over-joyed by the cosmopolitan diversity of the city and of the seminary, which was a dramatic contrast to Knox.

I remember several things which summed up for me at that moment, the difference in student life: Union ran its own day care centre for the children of students and faculty; there was a small pub for students in the upper refectory (unthinkable in a Presbyterian theological college); and within the student body there was a gay and lesbian caucus. There was one other woman in my class at Knox, but, at Union, half of the students were women, and more than a third of the faculty.

But the memory of Union that came back to me this week as I thought about the texts for today, was the attention that my teachers and my fellow students paid to power. When you hold power, when you are in the centre of defining a discourse such as theology, you don't need to pay attention to power. You don't even notice it operating. Because, if you notice your power, you might have to examine it, and you might have to acknowledge the privilege inherent in it.

At Union, even people with power, including my teacher Larry Rasmussen, a straight white man, were prepared to investigate power, not simply to critique it as a problem (as we often do when we see it exercised in an oppressive way) but to embrace the idea of power. Power as our capacity to influence our world for good. Larry taught a course titled Jesus and Power.

Our gospel reading today deals with conflict and ambition among the disciples. James and John want more status, and the power that would go with it; and without any hint of embarrassment, they ask Jesus for it. The other disciples are not impressed.

The encounter is a teachable moment which Jesus seizes: he draws a contrast between power exercised in the community of friends that follow him - and power exercised by the "powers that be." The basis of power in Jesus' community is servanthood, being there for others in order to work for the good in partnership with God. The basis of power in the world at large is depicted in the text in the words "domineering" and "arrogant." Both emphasize that power is self-serving. It's power that 'lords over' over others. In contrast is the self-giving power and community called for and modelled by Jesus.

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant" (verse 43b). The word translated as "servant" is *diakonos*. In Jesus' time it referred to a servant whose main duty was to wait on the family at the table. Within a generation of the early church, it had become the most common term for "ministry" in the church. Power in Christian community comes in the exercise of ministry, understanding that "ministry" includes all members, both lay and ordained. Ministry takes form in using your gifts to do what is good for others and for the community as a whole. It is quite different to the 'being good' which as Mary Oliver's poem suggests, may limit our capacity to live well - for ourselves and for others.

With Jesus, the values and power-relations that characterize this time are to be overturned, replaced with the values of service and relationships of mutuality. Relationships of mutuality and seeking the common good destabilise any attempt to "become great" or "become the first." The only way to truly follow Jesus' teaching here is to give up any pretence at being "the best" - or even the good; any pretence to be the best among the disciples or the community of disciples.

James' and John's outrageous request for thrones of glory is undercut, but the ten's indignation at being left out of that request is undercut as well. What is left for the disciples, for the community, is Jesus' cup and Jesus' baptism, joining with Jesus in suffering and joining with Jesus in resurrective transformation; joining with Jesus in relationships of creative love that enact the reign of God.

The Jesus of this gospel reading invites us to radically reconsider the notion of power and the place of status in our lives. We have a choice about how we use power: power to overpower people or power to expand the freedom of people.

In our time and context, dominating power is not wielded by the sword but by the dollar. It is wielded in the manipulation of the body politic by stirring up fears that allow us to demonise people who are different from the dominant group because of race, religion, gender, sexuality, or status as a migrant, a refugee or a person seeking asylum. This power serves the interests of those who are already powerful and it serves their interest in the accumulation of their wealth.

Process theologians like John Cobb talk about 'unilateral' power, and 'relational' power. Unilateral power is about seeking to influence others in order to advance our own purposes. It pits individuals and groups against other individuals and groups. It implies the gain in power of the one is the loss of power in the other.

On the other hand relational power is about having the ability to both absorb and exert an influence... To influence others and to be influenced by others. It means relationships play a constructive role in the creation of individuals and of groups and in their subsequent freedom to be themselves.

In today's gospel story, the writer Mark, is telling us that Jesus operated in the area of relational power. I think that Jesus did this because he understood the nature of the power of God to be relational, rather than unilateral. He gives us insight into how we might understand the sacred in our time.

While the voice of God speaking to Job in a whirlwind might not seem exactly comforting, I think that, in its time, it would have conveyed a powerful message of God in relation with humanity, a God who saw Job's distress and engaged with Job's call for redemption and justice. A God moved by the suffering of a human.

Feminist theologian, Carter Heyward, has profoundly shaped my understanding of God – and of power. I knew Carter at Union (her partner Beverly Harrison was my doctoral advisor). Carter's book, *The Redemption of God: A theology of mutual relation*, has been really significant in my own theological thinking, especially in the process of thinking of God in ways other than anthropomorphic projection. Carter speaks of God as being "the source of power in relation." God as the 'in between,' the 'crossing over' that is present in relationships that are just and mutual.

Speaking of power and God, Carter says: "*We touch this strength, our power, who we are in the world, when we are most fully in touch with one another and with the world...in so doing, we are participants in ongoing incarnation, bringing God to life in the world.*"

Her reflection on what God is continues:

"For god is nothing other than the eternally creative source of our relational power, our common strength, a god whose movement is to empower, bringing us into our own together, a god whose name in history is love... which is just, mutually empowering, and co-creative."

Through Carter Heyward's theology, I came to re-imagine God and thus to find a home again in the liturgies of the church which I had found so alienating when I thought that God could only be a controlling patriarch. Through Carter's work, I re-imagined Jesus too, as the one who revealed for us that the sacred spirit of life can be experienced as the power moving us in the making of justice with compassion, and of peace with justice.

The disciples in the gospel story still think that Jesus is leading them towards something that will extract them from the trials of relational, interconnected life.

However, as disciples, we are not just called to maintain the web of life. We are called to repair it at the places where the damage is the worst. This is the unique, God-inspired way that Jesus takes, that could make Christianity a powerful way of being in the world – if we could only practice it.

In church communities we value our care of one another, but this Christianity formed in the memory of Jesus affirms and goes beyond a community-care ethic in at least one very important respect. It gives precedence to certain subjects: to the poor and the oppressed, to the despised, the excluded and the forgotten. There is suffering in the world, and in Jesus we are called to be part of standing in solidarity with those who are hurt, to serve their needs.

This is the system that James and John have got themselves tangled up in. Now we are asked, week by week as we engage with the gospel, do we want to be involved too? How will we sustain ourselves in the times that seem hopeless and even dangerous to be justice-seekers?

Thinking about the challenges for justice in our society and our world, and the evidence of suffering, it is almost inevitable that we will at times feel a sense of hopelessness.

Holding on to faith in the power of God-with-us -- our creative, liberating power with one another – is a source of hope for me. Holding on to the vision of the reign of God sustains me.

To be disciples of Jesus, we need a vision. Our companions in living, working and visioning; the claims of justice; and the urgings of the spirit can sustain us. We can begin to imagine the implications of the connectedness of all life, our own life - and that of other humans and creatures, and the earth itself.

We can see more completely the importance of living in such a way as to celebrate the struggle for mutuality, not only as an ethical ideal but as the very essence of who we are in the world -- the basis of our survival.

We can learn that our individuality is created by our relatedness, not the other way around. We become who we are in relation, and this is a very great good. It is the foundation of what it means to be human, what it means to be created "in the image of God."

We don't know all the answers. We live with the mystery and follow in faith wherever the way of Jesus will lead us.

Let us embrace the journey and enjoy this community of faith, which nurtures us as persons in relation. Let us move on in the journey of our lives, knowing that we are loved; knowing that because of grace we do not have to, as Mary Oliver says 'be good' in order to be acceptable.

In the grace of full acceptance, in the grace of this embrace, may we find respond in freedom to the call to love others as we are loved, by living a life committed to love and justice in the power of mutual relation, which is God.