

All Saints C
Peace, Seattle
November 7, 2010 epk
Daniel, Ephesians, Luke 6

REAL POWER; REAL LOVE

If there's a theme that runs through our texts this All Saints Sunday, it's a theme that has to do with power and that asks: who has it and how it is manifest?

In Daniel's dream—(nightmare is more like it)—we catch a glimpse of four terrible beasts rising up out of the sea preparing to wreak havoc on earth. Dreadful times breed dreadful symbols, and that's what's happened here, as the rule of terrorist kings collides with the faith life of God's persecuted people to produce some of the best special effects literature ever published.

The upshot is this: God's people, though persecuted, have not been forgotten; their misery will not last forever. The dreaded beasts may have their time, but in the end it is not they but rather the holy ones of the Most High who will receive and possess the kingdom forever.

The question of power and the lack thereof informs our second lesson as well.

Paul delivers to the vulnerable Christian minority of Ephesus the news that, in spite of how things look right now, God holds their destiny firmly and powerfully in hand.

THE HOPE THAT EMPOWERS THE CHURCH, Paul tells them, IS THE SAME POWER GOD PUT TO WORK IN CHRIST WHEN GOD RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD.

Finally, in his sermon on the plain, Jesus scatters blessings like seeds upon the "have-nots" of our world, promising them that even now God's reign is turning the world upside down, lifting bottom dwellers to places of honor while handing the richly-entitled buckets and mops.

But Jesus' sermon doesn't end with blessing—it moves on to challenge us to give away the very power with which we've been endowed.

YOU WANT TO WIELD POWER? Jesus asks,

- LOVE YOUR ENEMIES,
- DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO HATE YOU,
- BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE YOU,
- PRAY FOR THOSE WHO ABUSE YOU.
- DO TO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU.

In her book JESUS FREAK, Sara Miles asks:

What would it mean to live as if you—and every one around you—were Jesus, and filled with his power? To just take his teachings literally, go out the front door of your home, and act on them?¹

Telling the story of her mid-life conversion to Christianity and the food ministry it inspired, Miles goes on:

In the thrilling and difficult years after my first communion, I kept learning that my new Christian identity required me to act. Simply going to church offered no ethereal juju that would automatically turn me into a less smug and self-righteous person. Time and again, I was going to

¹ Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak*. (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2010) p. ix.

have to forgive people I was mad at, say I was sorry, be honest when I felt petty, and sit down to eat, as Jesus did, with my betrayers and enemies: the mad, the boring, and the merely unlikable. ...I found [this] hard to swallow. Couldn't I choose whom I wanted to be yoked together with for eternity? And it was nerve-wracking. Sooner or later, I was going to have to consider the possibility that feeding wasn't the only command Jesus intended his one body to take seriously. All of us were also expected to heal, forgive, and raise the dead—not in some lofty symbolic way, but right here.²

Miles' insights make Jesus' words from his sermon on the plain come alive because of their specificity, and it's the same kind of specificity that gives meaning to our celebration of All Saints.

The people whose photographs surround us out here (on the walls) and in here (our hearts); the saints like Dorothy and Irene, Orville and Ken who lived their one-of-a-kind lives among us with their own particular (and sometimes peculiar) sensibilities, had their own flaws as well as their own endearing characteristics. Each incarnated his or her own unique versions of humanity.

It wasn't in some generic way that God called and blessed them but rather through their particular life stories, in particular ways; calling them to the waters, washing them, drowning them, raising them up with Christ to be Christ in the world.

They join the saints not because they managed to reach a certain level of spiritual maturity, but because God in Christ choose them as children, loved and forgave them, and, eventually, called them to his side.

The thing about Jesus, you see, the reason so many people followed him around hanging on his every word—and still do—is because he never loves anyone in general; he loves and accepts each one of us individually, in all our particularity.

And it is because of this great love, this focused, intimate, knowing love that he can also say to us: LOVE YOUR ENEMIES. DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO HATE YOU. BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE YOU. These are not lofty, theoretical principles we're called to; they have names, they have addresses.

“The thing that sucks about being a Christian,” writes Sara Miles, “is that God actually lives in people...If Jesus is about anything, it's the inconvenient truth that a spiritual life is a physical life. The people I met were Jesus' body: suffering, feeding each other, healing the sick, forgiving one another, rising out of death. Their freaky hands and legs and backs were doing his work, carrying his power through the world.”³

There's no need for us to redeem the lives, cover over the mistakes or scars, shut in the closet the unsightly or ungodly characteristics of the people whose lives we lift up today, as if to protect God from them, or to project them from themselves. God knows each one's whole story, and having loved them in Christ Jesus, has claimed them for eternity.

Who really has the power in today's world?

² Ibid, p. xii.

³ Ibid, p. xvii, xviii.

According to the world's reckoning, and last week's election results, Republicans will return to power in a dramatic fashion after handing Democrats a "shellacking" at the polls.

That's one kind of power, I suppose. But not the kind that animates the lives of God's faithful people.

Who holds the power in today's world? According to the gospel, you do. For Christ dwells in you; and Christ has chosen to dwell in the world through you.

"Jesus," Sara Miles concludes, "doesn't look for the most "religious," the most doctrinally correct, or, for that matter, the smartest of his beloved people to build his kingdom, but hands over authority to anyone willing to suspend self-doubt and simply trust Jesus' faith in us."⁴

And this Meal in which we share is the very thing which, as we ingest it, unites us with that great community of saints from all times and places, and empowers us to go out and love as he first loved us. May it be so.

Amen.

⁴ Ibid, xx.