

# “Power and Powerlessness” by Ken Burton

July 5, 2015



## The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

This morning I would like to reflect for a few minutes on power and powerlessness. Let me say right at the beginning that it is not a topic with which I am fully comfortable. This is because of my limited personal experience with certain aspects of it. Such a limitation would usually cause me to avoid a particular subject, but this matter of power and powerlessness kept coming to my attention as I worked with this morning's lections. Paul deals with it explicitly in the passage from Second Corinthians, and there are echoes of it in the other lections so I felt led to plunge in.

Power and powerlessness have both negative and positive aspects. This comes as at least a mild surprise. We tend to think of having power or being powerful as a good thing and of powerlessness or weakness as a negative quality. There is truth in both of these views, but taken alone, each represents an over-simplified perspective. So this morning I am asking you to put aside these usual judgments about these terms and to think of both power and powerlessness as being inherently neutral and able to be used in either positive, constructive ways or negatively.

## Negative Power

It is the negative side of power that often comes to mind first because it has had and can have such destructive implications. The political and economic domination system which so limits freedom and opportunity and which shows up, either overtly or covertly, in most modern societies exemplifies the corporate aspect of negative power. At the personal level, grandiosity, the belief that I am always right and everyone else wrong unless they agree with me, is one expression of negative power. I have had some personal experience with power as grandiosity, as some of you know better than I. I can recall a moment during the reflection time at the end of a service where I had preached when one of you said simply, "Ken, how can you be so sure?" Grandiosity, indeed! Paul's opponents at Corinth were exercising this kind of power, claiming that because they had more and better visions of the Divine, that they and their message was superior to the apostle's. Fraud, neglect, and abuse are other examples of negative power. Prayers for peace and justice in our gathering circle as well as our community prayers of intercession are so often focused on areas of our collective life where power abused, negative power, predominates.

## Positive Power

Sometimes we get so focused on the destructive aspects of power that we forget that there is the positive; indeed, we are "called through the storm" of domination systems, grandiosity and abuse to see and live into the positive. It is humbling to have in our gathering here this morning so many who exercise this positive power. They, you, are competent, capable, effective servant leaders, living out specific calls to care and serve in a broken and hurting world. There have been times for me in Seekers and elsewhere when I have been able to exercise this positive power. One of these may be in this moment as I speak or maybe not. Serving as moderator of my mission group and elsewhere, I have been able to focus discussion and move matters forward in ways that were creative and helpful, an exercise of positive power.

One of the conditions that evokes these positive demonstrations of power is community. We see the Gospel this morning. Because the good people of Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, could see him only as the carpenter's

son and one more sibling in a large family, Jesus lost most of the power that he had when the crowds from other Galilean towns saw him as healer and prophet. Indeed as Robert Greenleaf points out in that much-quoted passage that helped us Seekers find our name, "Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent may wither away. It is seekers, then, who make prophets...." We might add not only prophets but healers and teachers and administrators and all who respond faithfully to call, exercising power in healing, caring, creative ways.

It is this same dynamic that supported King David's rise from shepherd of sheep to shepherd-as-king of Israel. Although David went on to establish a domination system in which the tribes of Israel subjected their neighbors, his empowerment as king first of the Northern Kingdom and later of all Israel was based on a pact with the elders of Israel and grounded in God's command to "shepherd my people". So it is not only prophets, healers and teachers that are made by responding seekers, but also political leaders. An important source, therefore, of positive power is the support of our community, of those who understand and share our call.

Another source of positive power is people who have done their inner work. Here I follow the thinking of Alice Miller in [\*The Drama of the Gifted Child\*](#). So many of us were seriously damaged as very young children by parents who failed to respond or responded inappropriately to our childhood needs, often because of the damage done to them by their parents. The memories of these wounds are buried deep in our psyches and lost to consciousness, but they can have a profound effect on our adult behavior, including a damaging impact on our own children as well as social and political views that are intolerant or worse. All of this points to an exercise of negative power. Miller argues that change can only happen when the childhood hurts become conscious, accompanied by grief and tears, often in therapy. It is then that we become free to exercise positive power for the sake of a broken and hurting world.

### Negative Powerlessness

Yesterday morning after I awoke I was able to remember and to record dream fragments, each of which seem to capture something of this

negative powerlessness. In one of them, I shared with a child news of his mother's impending death before his parents had a chance to do so. (Not a good idea!) In another, I was staying in a business hotel room with a door that would not lock and a bed that I had to make myself with my own linens. There was also confusion about when I was to check out and the next guest to check in. In a final segment I was wearing pajamas in what was supposed to be a high school computer lab. It had no computers but was instead full of women and girls manually sorting documents. When rusty water started coming in through an HVAC vent, I ran through the halls of the school, still in my pajamas, looking for a building engineer. After three floors of the building and multiple flights of step, I found a group of engineers making their way to the computer lab and needing no help from me. You may find some of these images of PJ-clad Ken amusing, but together, these dreams illustrate, to my chagrin, the kind of painful incompetence, misdirection, and confusion that is negative powerlessness.

For me that weakness is unfortunately not confined to dreams. Some of you may recall hearing me speak in circle about my experience with a grant from the [Growing Edge Fund](#). I used it to take a course called "The Art of Pastoral Care" in which I was to learn and practice skills to be used in pastoring people who were hurting, particularly in institutional settings. In the hospital where I was to first exercise these skills, I was paralyzed by anxiety and for the most part ineffective as a pastor. This for me was a profound waking world experience of the incompetent, ineffective blundering that is negative powerlessness.

### Positive Powerlessness

I approach the final aspect of this topic with some trepidation because of my lack of personal experience with it. Most of what I am about to say is based on [a sermon that Gordon Cosby offered on July 26, 1987, at the Church of the Saviour entitled "Welcoming Powerlessness"](#). I found it as an audio recording on the inward/outward web site. Gordon speaks of relinquishing the positive power, letting it go. This may be done voluntarily or it may be coerced by others, but in either case that strength of mind or body or both that has been so important for so long is given up or taken away. We move from being active to passivity, from being subject to object. Jesus' capture in Gethsemane and subsequent passion are the most powerful

Biblical examples. Whether intentionally or not, *when we are positively powerless, we take on suffering*. At some crucial point in personal or professional life, we simply cannot function, or we weaken mentally and physically as we age. We continue to try as hard as ever, but the results are not the same. We are gradually relinquishing power, being handed over. Gordon reports that this experience offers us “an image of God’s nature at a deeper level.” An image of God’s nature at a deeper level. I share Gordon’s observation with you without amplification or comment because it comes from a place where my own spiritual journey has not taken me, but it is clear that this dynamic of being handed over, of becoming positively powerless and thus gaining a stronger sense of God, is an important component of the Christian journey.

So where does this overview of power and powerlessness leave us? Otherwise put, “Ken, why are you sharing this with us this morning?” It is an important issue for me because of my experiences with these dynamics and, in the one case, my lack of such experience. Power and powerlessness are important dynamics for Seekers as we continue to empower one another and our mission groups. How we work with them individually and together will be significant in our ongoing efforts to be faithful to our call and to the power of the Spirit at work within and among us.