

POWER TO THE PEOPLE
Sermon for Pentecost 9B: Mk6:1-13
LPC, 7/5/09

Why doesn't God zap Osama bin Laden and Kim Jong-Il? Why doesn't God make boils break out on corrupt and exploitative businessmen and officials? Why doesn't God smite the infidels making so much trouble for Christ's Church at General Convention (Interestingly enough this last question occurs to just about everyone regardless of where they stand on the issues. It's probably the most unitive idea at Convention.) But to get back to the point, if God loves the poor so much, why doesn't God do something about them?

A traditional tenet of Christian belief is that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful. Another tenet is that God is loving and good. Still another is that God is working out God's purpose of salvation on the earth. So why is it taking so long? Why is there so much badness?

This question can be related to an interesting line of thought held by many theologians and most famously articulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor jailed and executed by the Third Reich for his opposition to Nazism. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer writes of God's voluntary powerlessness:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world and that is precisely the way, the only way, he is with us and helps us ... The Bible directs us to God's powerlessness and suffering. Only the suffering God can help.

In other words, the infinite God voluntarily becomes finite in the human form of Jesus Christ in order to stand by and with suffering humanity, in a way that would be otherwise impossible.

God limits Godself in order to redeem humankind at our lowest points. What the Bible further suggests is that God also limits Godself in order to work in the world.

We believe that God created the universe, and placed humans in it. We also believe that humans have an apparently infinite capacity to screw up God's plans for goodness and redemption in the world. If God used God's infinite power to just set everything to rights in one fell swoop, people would be like lumps of playdough to God instead of the God-infused clay that God creates to share the work of redemption.

Think of a major league pitcher playing catch in his backyard with his wife and five-year-old son. This pitcher can throw 90 miles an hour, but he limits himself with his family. Let's say his wife is athletic and in good shape and even played fast-pitch in college. Still, if he threw her his speedball he could hurt her. And if he used the heat on his child, he might kill him. He limits his power, lobbing gentle balls to the boy. Perhaps the child will gradually improve and one day even surpass his father in power. But at this

stage the father voluntarily limits his own power to protect those he loves, and, *perhaps*, in so doing he improves his family's ability to do something like he himself can do.

And so God, in God's work of redeeming the universe, voluntarily limits God's own power to protect us, and, perhaps, bring us along to participate in God's work of redeeming the world.

The evidence is, from passages like today's Gospel reading from Mark, that God chooses to work out God's work of redemption by working through people. Inexpert and inexperienced people. Bumbling people. In other words, people like you and me.

Mark tells us that after being rebuffed in his own hometown, Jesus send out his twelve disciples two by two to teach, preach and heal in Jesus' name. Are these guys professional teachers, preachers and healers? Do they have any experience or expertise? NO! They are a bunch of fishermen and a bureaucrat (that's Matthew the tax-collector)! Yet these are the ones Jesus chooses. The interesting thing is, with the power of Jesus behind them, they end up doing pretty well: "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them."

The implication is that there are places that we bumbling humans can go that God, in all God's blazing power, cannot go. God breaks off a tiny shard of God's infinite power and tells us, "take this into that little dark space that my enormous power would blow to bits, and work whatever redemption with it that you can."

The fact is, that backed by God's power, we human beings can do far more than we think. People are far more inclined to underestimate what they can do in the world than to overestimate. Brothers and sisters, we are more powerful than we can imagine.

Of course, just last Sunday I spoke about how it is that when people admit powerlessness before God, that is when God's healing is released. And now I am saying that people are more powerful than they know.

The two ideas of human powerlessness and human power are not inconsistent. One empties oneself of one's own egotistical power to be filled with the power of God. One sheds any thought of being able to act on one's own before being able to draw upon the vast resources of God's power. It's as if we are engines capable of using rocket fuel, but first we have to empty our tanks of the low-octane gasoline we usually rely on.

It is frankly daunting to think of being called by God to participate in God's work of redeeming the universe – of teaching, preaching, healing, forgiving, liberating, bringing justice, and on and on. But believe it. This is how God chooses to work: by calling me and you to do this work. Frankly I am tempted to look at myself and ask God, "Am I the best you can do? Are *we* the best you can do, God?"

God's answer is, "yes."