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Proper 7C – Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
June 20, 2010
St. John's Episcopal Church, Wichita, KS

This morning we read two different stories, that show us two different understandings of what it is like to call upon the power of God.

In the Gospel, we read the story of Jesus wielding the kind of direct, public power that he really does not usually use. Like a superhero, he lands in a spot where there is trouble, assesses the situation, and dispatches the bad guys, which in this case are the demons possessing a man of the village.

His solution is at once elegant and somewhat humorous, and certainly memorable. The rescued man thanks him profusely; the people of the village look at him with awe and not a little fear, and he goes upon his way. Theologian Robert Farrar Capon calls this 'right-handed power;' the direct use of force or persuasion to get what you want, the hero who rescues the day.

Meanwhile, in the Old Testament, Elijah could desperately use a little of this type of power, God swooping in to rescue him, as he is running to escape Jezebel and her very real threats of death against him.

And yes, he does get a visit from an angel and eventually he does hear God's voice, but he really has to strain to hear it – it is NOT in the wind or the earthquake, it does NOT come with any fanfare or fireworks, but it instead it is what used to be translated as, 'the still, small voice,' and now is more accurately represented as 'the sound of sheer silence.'

And what does Elijah hear in this moment of silence that he recognizes as God? 'Go back, and face alone the situation in which someone seeks your life.'

Not exactly a superhero rescue from danger. Some might question whether God is exercising his power here or not.

And it is extremely interesting to me, as we often fall back on the cliché of the Old Testament God of wrath and the New Testament God of compassion, that it is Jesus who is whipping out the big guns in the Gospel and it is Elijah in First Kings who has to listen for a whisper. And it is the Old Testament that is giving us an example of 'left-handed power,' the idea of resistance to evil which is actually no resistance at all.

And this is a part of our faith that continues to confound us, I think.

That despite how Jesus acts in today's Gospel, the reason we are all here, the reason that there IS such a thing as Christianity, is that our God died NOT resisting evil, that our Savior is noted for accepting pain and torture and suffering and death.

That we are a people of left-handed power. And even though this is the very act that saved us, it is sometimes hard to remember this TODAY.

Some of you may know, and I am sure that those in my Anglican Identity class are well aware, that our world-wide Anglican Communion is once again in an uproar. The Anglican Communion is a fellowship of all the churches around the globe that are historically linked to the Church of England, with the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is the head of the English Church, as our spiritual leader, but without any actual authority.

For the past 150 or so years, this Communion has operated under the principle that this fellowship is non-binding, that we are simply independent churches with a common origin who share certain values and viewpoints as a Christian community – notably our stress on the importance of how we worship together – our liturgy and our book of common prayer, and our love of the English Church’s ideal of being the ‘middle way’ between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, and our foundations of Scripture, tradition and reason that are at the core of our identity.

For the past several years, though, this relationship of Communion has been strained, in part because of the Episcopal Church’s decision to consecrate Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop to be elected in our church, but also for other reasons, as wide-ranging as the global shift of the population of Anglicans from mostly white, western Europeans to those whose homes are mostly in Africa and Asia; and a world-wide re-interpretation of Christianity, especially in response to the increased global Muslim population, as more fundamentally conservative and Scripture-based in a more literal understanding than has been previously professed by Anglicans.

This has led to enormous tensions among our churches, and increased frustration on the part of the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who on Pentecost issued a letter dismissing several Episcopalians from positions they held on Anglican Communion committees, and this past week, he asked our Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts-Schori, not to wear her mitre or carry her crozier, which are the symbols of her authority as the head of our church, when she preached at Southwark Cathedral in England.

This has led to not a little reaction from Anglicans worldwide, who believe that our Communion explicitly understands that the Archbishop of Canterbury has no authority to tell Episcopalians what they can or cannot do. And this has further stressed the bonds of affection that have previously held our Anglican Communion churches together.

Now, this may seem like unfortunate pettiness among a small group of church officials, far removed from our every day lives, and even farther removed from our call to follow Jesus.

And it may seem to have nothing to do with the Gospel.

But I think, instead, that it is a sign that once again, we are in a very particular place as those who call ourselves Jesus' disciples: the same place we were just after Jesus' ascension, when the church itself was formed; as we were just after Christians went from being tortured and persecuted to being the official religion of the Roman Empire; as we were when Martin Luther set off the Protestant Reformation and Henry VIII set off the English Reformation, both reacting to the Roman Church and both at essentially the same time; as we were when English Church members in the newborn United States of America founded the Episcopal Church in this country; and that is, we are again at the place as the Church, where we must ask ourselves which kind of power we believe in: the right-handed power of force, or the left-handed power of sacrifice.

And it is surely true, and demonstrated in our Gospel today, that God is absolutely capable of both and that Jesus demonstrated both throughout his life and ministry.

But it seems clear to me that there is only one type of power that God chose as the power that saved us and the entire world from sin and evil, and that is the left-handed power of repentance and forgiveness, and non-resistance in the face of actual violence. We are, in our world today, in the midst of another transformation of Christianity, and because of this, it is essential that we proclaim boldly what we believe, but also that we remember that how we proclaim this is as important as what we proclaim.

We CAN call upon the power of God as a force to cast one another out, we CAN use God as our weapon or our shield, barricading ourselves into the rightness of our position because it is what we understand as faithful.

OR, we can listen in the midst of these gales of hot air blowing, on the ground that is shaking with anger and division, and listen instead for the just barely discernible voice of God which says, 'go back out there and face what you fear, with open hands and open hearts.'

Today in Paul's letter to the Galatians, a letter he wrote while he was in deep conflict with Peter, his brother in Christ, he gives us one of the most beautiful lines in all of Scripture: 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'

And I think that this line is very often misinterpreted. I think we often hear it and decide that we must use our right-handed power, the power of force or persuasion, to overcome the obstacles of division between us.

But I don't think that this is what Paul means. I think, instead, that he is referring to the opposite, to the fact that Jesus' actions of self-giving and compassion, his willingness to give of himself even unto death, are what bought our ability to believe that love is the most powerful force for change in the world.

It is the only force that truly challenges violence and evil, even the violence and evil that we are fighting amongst ourselves. As Christians in conflict with Christians, the best we

can do is believe that this is the power that will bring us back into fellowship with one another again.

It is our belief in the power of God, who COULD have used any amount of force to be right, and instead gave up everything but the power to love and forgive.