



Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

2 Samuel 1:1,17-27 2 Corinthians 8:7-15 Mark 5:21-43

Good Morning! I am so glad to be back with you after the long trek to the Midwest and back to drop our two teens at their summer camps. I hope you all have been well in the nine days I've been gone. Besides a good time of "powering down" and a deep renewed appreciation for the beauty of this country, I learned one thing on this trip: I am not built to be a long-distance trucker or road warrior!

God be with you this day and through this coming week, as we all face tremendous heat like this region has not seen in anytime in recent history. If anyone needs a place to stay cool during the days, please have them come to the church.

Let's all pray for the athletes who have come here from all over to compete in the triathlon. What a time for this competition to happen! These people are incredibly strong and resilient, and know how to push their strength and how to read their own bodies to gauge when they are truly at some limits they should not try to cross. We pray for their wisdom, strength, and gentleness with themselves even as they enter this contest in such extraordinary heat.

What is strength? What is power? An event like today's triathlon puts an image of personal strength and power in front of us – and we cheer them on and marvel at what the individual body can do and can bear when well-trained. Let's face it – I'm no triathlete!! I have trouble motivating myself to start, stay steady with, or resume any consistent exercise routine besides my daily dog-walk. But I have a prior student, a priest, who is a triathlete – and her commitment to training is amazing. She did observe, when she was pregnant and then gave birth, that all her training as an athlete did not really prepare her for the very different but very real strength and power required to bring a life into the world.

Today, we continue our journey of looking at power as it is shown to us in scripture through the lessons we encounter this summer. Today, we heard from the beginning of 2nd Samuel about David lamenting the death of Saul and Jonathan, and from Mark about two miraculous healings by Jesus.

And I have a couple of questions for you.

- What kind of power do you see in these readings from scripture today?
- How did David exercise power, and what kind of power did David demonstrate, in how he mourned publicly – even for Saul, who had sworn himself to be David's enemy and to hunt him down?
- What do we learn about the exercise of power from Jesus in the healing of the woman who had a bleeding affliction and in the raising of the little girl?

We might not think immediately about power in relation to these readings. But there is power – an amazing form of power – that is part of these stories. We can say it is the power of the Holy Spirit...but what does that actually look like in these stories?

What we hear today is the power of an open heart and life – the power of being available, accessible, touchable.

We can think of some powerful examples of people who show us just what this power of openness and availability looks like.

In the wider world, there is Amma, the contemporary Hindu spiritual leader who is known for her generous spirit, warmth, and the gift of hugging. People from all over the world come to see her, be seen and greeted with amazing warmth by her, and be enfolded in her embrace. As she embraces each person, she opens herself to honoring each person as a beloved and to letting the love of the divine flow through her. She allows herself to become a channel for a powerful healing love greater than anything she alone could offer. She opens herself to both the divine and to each person, allowing herself to be touched and to have power flow through her.

In our own Christian history, there is Francis of Assisi, who found himself drawn to pouring himself out in love and service for others at all levels of society. At a time when leprosy was feared and lepers were still banished to the outskirts of society for fear of contagion, Francis felt drawn by Jesus to reach out, touch, and bathe and cleanse a leper he met begging. He even ended his time embracing and kissing this man with leprosy. Here is an account from Thomas of Celano, who wrote about Francis's life:

*"[Francis said,] 'When I was in sins, it seemed extremely bitter to me to look at lepers, and the Lord himself led me among them and I practiced mercy with them.' So greatly loathsome was the sight of lepers to him at one time, he used to say, that, in the days of his vanity, he would look at their houses only from a distance of two miles and he would hold his nostrils with his hands. But now, when by the grace and the power of the Most High he was beginning to think of holy and useful things, while he was still clad in secular garments, he met a leper one day and, made stronger than himself, he kissed him..." "Then the holy lover of complete humility went to the lepers and lived with them, serving them most diligently for God's sake; and washing all foulness from them, he wiped away also the corruption of the ulcers."*¹

Now, later Franciscans tried to be this generous in spirit during the Black Plague, and this did not go so well for them, as that pandemic was incredibly contagious and vigorous. But Franciscans have been at the heart of a respectful care and love for those who have often been outcast.

In our own Episcopal Church today, a woman named Kaze Gadaway has dedicated herself in recent years to bringing bags and backpacks of food, basic clothing, and toiletries to homeless people across her region in Arizona. She began this ministry of love and care before the pandemic, and continued

¹ "Meeting with the leper," from Vatican Documents online: https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20001103_tom-da-celano_en.html

throughout the pandemic – drawing together donations from people and purchases with donated funds to assemble these packs and bring them directly to people in her car. She has consistently gone beyond simply dropping off the packs and has gotten out of her car to meet and sit with people, talk to them, and hear their stories. She makes herself radically and completely available to them, continuing to set aside any of her own biases and letting their stories change her perspectives on them and on life. She then shares these encounters with people around the country and world on Facebook, inviting us all to see with fresh eyes and find our own heart of compassion. She makes herself a channel, a conduit, for the stories of those who are rarely heard and are often dismissed. God’s grace flows both ways through her – to homeless people, and from them to us.

These are examples of an open heart. And, today in our scriptures we hear of such openness in the stories of David and of Jesus.

So, back to David. We have throughout David’s life an example of the power of an open heart – and in today’s reading, the power of an open heart even to those who have become enemies, as Saul had become to David. David had loved and devoted himself to Saul, but Saul had become jealous of David’s success in battle and overall goodness and the way he was admired by the people – so he attacked him and pledged to hunt him down. In 2nd Samuel, we hear all about the kingship of David over Israel. But it begins with this lament – and 1st Samuel ends with the tragic death of Saul on the battlefield. The enemies of Israel had won the battle, the soldiers of Israel had fled, and Saul’s sons had already been killed. Surrounded by carnage, he turned to his arms-bearer and ordered him to kill him so that he would not be captured or killed by the enemies of Israel. The arms-bearer in honor and care for Saul would not, so Saul fell on his own sword, and the arms-bearer did the same, dying by his king’s side.

When David learned the news, he tore his clothes and began to weep along with other leaders.

It takes courage, it takes strength, it takes a courageous openness, to weep for others – and especially to weep for those who have opposed us. And it demonstrates a kind of strength to others because it opens a gateway to human compassion and tenderness that is rooted in strong love and in care for something greater than oneself.

Think about those in national service who died in recent years, whom the nation has mourned – lain in state in the nation’s Capitol, and viewed with respects given by Republicans and Democrats alike and by leaders from across the political spectrum. The nation marked in mourning the deaths of John McCain and Ruth Bader Ginsberg and John Lewis, just to name a few. And almost every significant leader, from all perspectives, came to view them and speak about them, not just showing up but giving voice to the sorrow of a people even when it may not be one’s own sorrow, even when someone has stood against you or even advanced against you.

So, friends. Do we have the courage to mourn for our enemies? Does each one of us have the heart to open to the tender mercies of God flowing through us to others – in life and in death – even if someone has fought with us and we with them?

This is one way we show the power of a radical openness that means being available in heart, soul, body, mind, and strength – open to allowing our powers flow out from you and me to others – even when not beginning with our own action or decision but following someone else’s call and request.

Jesus let power flow through him. One might say that Jesus was truly a spiritual triathlete. He knew how to take rest and time to refuel and refresh away from others, alone with God. But when he entered a space with others, he was fully available, fully open, fully accessible – full steam, complete openness, healing and feeding and bringing good news to whomever came. So Jesus entered the crowds fully available, and started off this journey today by making himself available to someone who asked for him to bring his healing power into his house for the sake of his beloved daughter. Jesus let power be available from him, let power readily flow from him to others. Even to the point of “having the tap open” so that someone in prayer and need could reach out and touch him. So, a woman whom no one could cure of her bleeding and pain reached out and touched Jesus. And Jesus felt the flow of healing power move through him and out from him to someone.

This is a kind of generosity that is the very heart of God – and, at the very heart of what it means to be human, made in God’s image. It is the God who cannot help but give and let the power of life-giving, liberating love flow forth – and the God who is willing to be touched and seized upon, who does not need to grant permission but just grants access to the generosity of God’s being.

What a power to offer, in a world where there is such grief! How might we offer this power of availability and openness of ourselves to others, in a time of grief and sorrow as we mourn the deaths of 600,000 people from the coronavirus in this nation, and millions around the world – as we mourn the deaths of many thousands from drug overdoses – as we see the long-enduring sorrow of those who have lost loved ones, or jobs, or homes? As we come forth from this pandemic, we have the sorrows of what we have been through – and it is important for us to acknowledge and sit with people in that sorrow, even as we give thanks for renewing life and energy.

To make a beginning, friends, I invite each one of you, before you leave this church or this park today, connect with someone you don’t usually connect with, and find a way to make yourself more fully available and accessible to one another in whatever brief time you talk with each other. As you pay attention fully to the other person, also take note of yourself and how open and available you are – in your posture, in your eye contact, in the openness of your spirit and your mind and heart, in how relaxed you are in your face and your arms, in how you reach out with a handshake or embrace. This is just a small start, but important. It’s a way to practice, today and each day going forward. This is how we build muscle and skill – not all at once with a deep dive, but step by step into the waters of God’s grace that flow all around us. And let us all open ourselves as fully as we can to the One who meets us and feeds us with His own presence at this table of overflowing grace.