

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, September 9, 2018**  
**Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

**From Powerlessness to real Power**

Text:

“Christ, the Power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Bill and George were out hunting in the woods of New Jersey when George suddenly collapsed. Bill rushed over to him, but George didn’t seem to be breathing and his eyes were all glazed over. Stuck in the woods, Bill felt utterly powerless. So, he took out his cell phone and after a minute or two of holding it up in the air, got signal. By now he was in panic mode. He called 911 and shouted, “Help, please help me. My friend George is dead! What on earth should I do?” The operator told Bill, “Sir, please calm down. I can help you. First of all, let’s make sure he’s really dead.” After a short silence, the operator heard a shot. Then Bill got back on the phone, “OK, now what?”

A politician I once knew told me that when he was elected, he was surprised to learn what little power he had. He found himself constantly being led by forces beyond his control. In situations in which he wanted to lead, he discovered that he was not leading at all, but was forced into reaction.

Dr. Stanley Glen, former Principal of Knox College Toronto, used to say in his lectures that “real power is very often secret power.” Frequently the owners of huge corporations are extremely low- profile people. Yet, they are able to circumvent the political process, manipulate the stock market, inflate or deflate national currencies or even are powerful enough to lobby National Governments to get what they want. They are very good at pulling strings and manipulating people and results in their favour.

In my time I have seen many prominent leaders fall from power: Winston Churchill, Stalin, Marcos, Gorbachev, Saddam Hussein, Pierre Trudeau, The Kennedys, Fidel Castro, Barack Obama and sooner or later Donald Trump.

Ferdinand Marcos was interesting. At one time he held all the trappings of power- soldiers, a palace, servants, immense wealth- but despite all these things he lost his grip on power. He was a multi billionaire, yet he slowly lost power.

The common assumption is that power is found in politics or high office or in wealth. We think that if we have these things we have power. But lose the office, lose the wealth, lose the Presidency...what then? We have the power as long as we hold the office or the title. Without the office the power is gone. Is that real power?

Why do the great fall from power if they have real power? How do the powerful become suddenly powerless? The term ends. How much power does Barack Obama have now?

**Is there perhaps a definition of power that we have missed?**

Here is the definition that fits the description of power that St. Paul argues for in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians.

St. Paul says: “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.

For St. Paul “Power is the ability to fulfill purpose; any action that defeats purpose is weakness.”

This definition of power rather than the trappings of worldly power opens up the world in a most compelling way. What this definition says is this: You don’t have to have the obvious

symbols of power in order to be a powerful person. You don't have to be a politician, or the owner of a multinational or a search engine or a dictator with an army or have the toys of power like status, cars homes, private jets, fabulous vacations, or the places of Saddam Hussein to have power.

You simply have to have one thing: **THE ABILITY TO FULFILL PURPOSE!**

There was a river where I used to live, with a bridge. A farmer came up to the bridge with a cow. When she got to the bridge the cow refused to cross the bridge. The farmer pushed and pulled the cow and then beat her with a stick, but she refused to move. The farmer eventually gave up and sat down. Another farmer arrived with another cow. He spoke to the first farmer, ascertained the difficulty, tied his cow to the bridge and pushed and pulled with the farmer on the first cow. The cow refused to budge. **They thought that pushing and pulling the cow would fulfill purpose.** They failed miserably.

Finally, they both gave up and the second farmer untied his cow and led her easily across the bridge. The first cow, as soon as the second cow got over the bridge, began to follow and walked over easily.

What was going on here? The power did not lie in the pushing and pulling or beating with sticks. Instead it lay in example- in the influence one cow had over another.

It was said over Lord Northcliffe, the newspaper magnate, "He aspired to power instead of influence and as a result forfeited both." This is an epitaph that could be written on many a famous tombstone.

A politician once told me that someone in government was opposed to the sale of nuclear power to a Latin American country. That politician was unable to convince his fellow politicians of his position. Finally, the deal was made over his objections.

A delegation was dispatched to sign up the deal, but the politician opposed to the deal went instead to the UN. Keeping his notes away from his aides, he made a courageous speech about the flagrant violations of human rights in the Latin American country. The result? The Latin American country was so angry that they cancelled the nuclear deal. **The power was not where the government thought it was, but in influence.**

Judas Iscariot thought that Jesus would take on political power. Many of his disciples thought he was seeking it on Palm Sunday when he entered Jerusalem. But Jesus had already faced down this temptation in the wilderness. This kind of power did not interest him.

The crowds soon abandoned Jesus. His disciples fled away. He appeared to be a hopeless misguided failure. And he was executed.

But a careful look at history, tells another story entirely. Look at the enormous influence on humanity of the Historical Jesus. Is there any more powerful figure in history than Jesus Christ? Any Caesar, any ruler/ dictator, philosopher or world thinker greater than Jesus Christ? Why? What is the clue to this man's mysterious power? Surely it lies in one thing: **THE ABILITY TO FULFILL PURPOSE.**

Jesus, as he fought this temptation to worldly power in the Wilderness, knew that for him political power would have meant a surrender to weakness- for weakness is the inability to fulfill purpose.

We can learn from him this truth: You can become the most powerful person in the world, President of the United States, a multi billionaire, yet, if you fail to fulfill purpose you are weak. That is the Jesus lesson in history.

A lot of people ask: Why is there so much suffering in the world?

If God really rules the world, why does God allow things like earthquakes and floods and epidemics to happen? People say that if God cannot stop such things, God is not Almighty, if

God could stop them and does not, God is not good.” Many, many, many people believe this and therefor take the next step and say there is no God.

I have lived long enough on the earth to know its sorrows and its beauty. I know the pleasures of the heart and the pains of the mind. I have seen people starve to death. I have seen people help themselves to food and then leave it wasted on their plates. I have watched people with lithe svelte bodies, I have seen stroke victims struggle with canes to move. I have seen people fulfilled in their jobs, I have seen the eyes of those waiting in lines in unemployment offices. I have seen people positively bursting with health. I have seen cancer eat up a man’s body until he was unrecognizable. I have met with a depressed executive who was fired and then I have received a phone call to say that he had ended it all. Two years later I stood at the graveside of his wife who couldn’t take it anymore and took her life as well.

Like you I have seen the light and the dark, the short ends of tragedy and the long threads of happiness and I have tried as you have tried to construct a world view that can make sense out of these things. Again: “If God cannot stop such things, God is not Almighty, if God could stop them and does not, God is not good.”

How do we answer this?

Bishop Stephen Neil, an Anglican, said that this question has been put in the wrong way. The right question he says is this: “Why did God choose to make a dangerous world? If God made the world and human beings for a purpose, that purpose must be one which can only be achieved in a world in which life for all of us will always be short and dangerous. Danger and suffering are necessary for that purpose.”

Now. if that is the case whatever could the purpose be? What overall purpose could ever be great enough to explain the presence of suffering in the world?

Let’s pause to think about this!

Is there anything in your estimation in this world more important than the possibility of love? Don’t we all agree that life without love is not worth living? Eric Fromm, the great psychiatrist once said, “Without love, humanity could not exist for a day.” If love ceased for one day, just stopped, no good bye kiss in the morning, no hugs when we get home or from friends, no appreciation given after a job well done, no look of love in a mother’s eye for her child, no one willing to go to Melawi with glasses so that people might see again, no familiar step on the stairs late at night, no reassuring phone calls from friends, no one willing to visit the sick, no one to write letters for Amnesty International, no Out of the Cold Program, no one to hold the hands of the dying, no one to visit in the jails, no one to sacrifice so that others might live?

There was a true story of a nanny who gave her life to save the children she was looking after. A dump truck careened over the sidewalk. She pulled them out of the way but was run over herself. Her last words were words of love: “Are the children alright?” she asked. Assured of that. she slipped away.

Fromm’s point? The world could not go on for a single day if there were not people like her!

Here is my conclusion: **There is nothing greater in the universe than love.** But love requires an enormously costly environment in which to grow, because love depends on Freedom and chance, randomness and unpredictability. Freedom means the possibility of loving everything or losing everything.

Freedom means the possibility of suffering and pain. A world where suffering and pain were programmed out would not be the earth as we know it. And the earth herself is precious, distinct, marvellous, full of wonders, very beautiful, awesome, majestic frail and delicate.

A brave new world without freedom would also be without comfort or compassion as we know it. There would be no uncertainty, no sudden thrilling moments, no surprises and no need for PASSION.

Life would be flat, even, controlled and love, fragile and costly as it is, would not exist.

But the world is not like that is it?

**In fact, the world does fulfill its purpose as a place for love.**

As the great American poet Robert Frost once said: "Earth's the right place for love: I don't know where it's likely to go better."

The historical Jesus was a radical thinker. He understood where real power lies. Christ knew that one could not win people's hearts through raw power, but only through influence. Christ deliberately chose to influence people's hearts through the suffering of the cross and the liberation of the empty tomb. Christ knew that a Roman cross and an empty tomb was where true power really lay. Who knew? Certainly not his contemporaries at the time.

When we go about refining gold, we place it in a crucible and expose it to very high temperature. The result is pure gold. Christ's message and teaching and example was that Love is the most precious thing in all the universe! It was worth living and dying for and the earth was the crucible where the refiner's fires made love possible.

When we wish to turn away death so that we might have that loved son or daughter or dearly beloved wife or husband back again, if only for a brief while, when we ask God to take away the heartache, the short ends of our lives, our soul's darkest hours, our sickness and all the tragedy that comes our way, **we have just asked for a God of weakness**, for weakness is the inability to fulfill purpose. For do we not agree that the greatest possible purpose for creating the world is love?

And in a half world where there was no suffering or death, would we have love in all its richest depths and heights?

I think not.

But love forged here on earth, although extremely costly to us and to God, is more than worth its painful birthing.

For in Love lies the meaning of EVERYTHING!