



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JUNE 28, 2015

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
OUT OF THE MINDS OF CHILDREN: QUESTIONS OF FAITH

How Did God Get His Power? Luke 19:11-27; I Corinthians 1:18-31

If you know Chase Joyner, you know that he loves movement and machines. His father uses chain saws to bring down big trees, tractors to pick them up, and big trucks to haul them off. Chase likes four-wheelers that can go fast on a flat track or work their way through creeks, woods, and fields. More than anything, however, Chase loves trains. He can tell you all about them, including the engines that pull freight and passengers down the rail. A busy and energetic young man, Chase himself is always on the move.

It is no surprise to me that Chase asked the question, “How did God get his power? Chase knows that it takes a lot of power to take down a tree and more power to ship a load of trees by rail. He also knows that God created the trees and everything else in the world. He knows that creation requires power. Chase knows that we talk a lot about God and power.

The psalmists remind us, “I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory” (Psalm 63.2); “The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty” (Psalm 29.4); “Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel; and whose power is in the skies” (Psalm 68.34); and “Be exalted, O Lord, in your strength! We will sing and praise your power” (Psalm 21.13) . . . and we do. As our worship began, we sang, “We Sing Your Mighty Power, O God, that made the mountains rise.”¹ In the depths of the Great Depression, hunkered down between two world wars, Harry Emerson Fosdick, then pastor of The Riverside Church in New York City, penned the words of his great hymn: “God of Grace and God of Glory, on thy people pour thy power”²

When we think of God, we often think of power. One of the first theological lessons many of us learned was the three O’s: God is Omniscient, God is Omnipresent, and God is Omnipotent—All-knowing, All-present, and All-powerful. When we think of God, we often think of power.

¹Isaac Watts, “We Sing Your Mighty Power, O God,” *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995): 64.

²Harry Emerson Fosdick, “God of Grace and God of Glory,” *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995): 464.

God is powerful. Ancient people like the Hebrews associated God's power with the forces of nature. Again the people sang their psalms to praise God:

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendor.
The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.
May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Psalm 29

Even the insurance industry gets religious when you start talking about storms and floods, earthquakes and tsunamis, calling them "Acts of God" and hoping that perhaps God will also pay for the repairs! There have been many times that natural disasters have been attributed to God as punishment for the sins of the people affected.

Yet Jesus debunked the idea that disasters and diseases are agents of God's wrath. He healed the people he met out of a sense of compassion. Had their suffering been the result of God's punishment, Jesus would have been acting contrary to God's desires. We also know that God does not decide to whip up a storm and hurl it toward the coast on a whim nor does God punish us by sending tornadoes and hurricanes. Although at the time it was the prevailing belief that God manifested his power in nature, the prophet Elijah realized that God is more likely to communicate with us in other ways.

When he was fleeing the wrath of Queen Jezebel, Elijah held a pity party in the mountains, hoping God would be merciful to him. God said to Elijah,

"Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. I Kings 19:11-12

Simon and Garfunkel were not the first ones to recognize that silence has a sound of its own. Sometimes it is only when we silence all of the noise of the world and our own lives that we can finally listen and hear God speak. Many of you have heard God speak in the silence of your lives.

The point is that God is indeed powerful and that power is intrinsic to God. The power to create, to sustain life, and to receive life back is simply a part of who God is. As we remembered last week, God did not make himself because God has always been. In the same way, God has always had power because it is a part of the nature of God.

Chase's question about God's power is so important because it causes us to think of another question. If God does not use brute power to get his way in the world, why do people ever do what God wants? That question points us to the gracious twin of power which is authority.

Whereas power involves the ability and willingness to use physical strength or some form of intimidation to get things done, authority operates on respect and loyalty associated with responsibility. A bully can force a child to hand over her lunch money through the threat of physical harm while a teacher informs the class that in order to eat lunch, payment must be received on the first day of each week. The bully operates under sheer physical intimidation whereas by her position the teacher is given authority by the administration, the school board, and the citizens of the community to carry out her responsibilities. Authority is the intrinsic or delegated right to use power responsibly whereas power alone often operates by fear and intimidation. A police officer is given the authority to use appropriate power to arrest someone who has transgressed the law. A person who hides behind a gun or homemade bomb and takes other lives out of pure hatred is misusing power. They have no authority.

God has power. When he was arrested in the garden and one of his followers drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus scolded him and said, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" (Matthew 26:52-54). Jesus could have relied upon his power to avoid his arrest and death, but his choice was to assert his authority over death by coming back to life and offering us eternal life.

In this way, God relates to us, not through fear and intimidation, but by the authority of God's love. God woos rather than threatens us. God loves us instead of forcing us to do what he wants.

I remember one time as a young boy when my father told me to do something and spelled out the consequences if I did not do it. Acting more cocky than wise, I said to my father, "I'm not afraid of you!" And he replied, "Good. I don't want you to be afraid of me, but I do expect you to do what I tell you to do." The last thing my father wanted was to create a sense of fear in me. What he did want was to foster a sense of respect for his authority as my father so that I would understand that he had my best interest at heart. I knew that I did not have to fear my father, that he was never going to inflict pain and suffering on me, but that he loved me and wanted the best for me. I learned a valuable lesson about God from him.

One morning a Sunday school teacher asked her students some questions after a lesson on God's omnipotence. She asked, "Is there anything God can't do?" The class was completely silent. Finally, one boy held up his hand.

The teacher was disappointed that the class had apparently missed the point of the lesson. She sighed and asked, "Well, what is it you think God can't do?" To which the boy replied, "God can't please everybody."

God is all-powerful and yet chooses to limit that power so that we have the privilege of free will. God does not intimidate us into following his will so that we can freely choose to do what God wants. Despite what we may hear in a Sunday sermon, God does not threaten us with suffering or death in order to force us to be faithful. Instead God loves us because God knows that love trumps fear and compassion overrides hatred every time.

I will be the first to admit that some of Jesus' parables are confusing. They intend to communicate one message but do so by using poor examples. A good instance is the parable of the nobleman and the servants we heard earlier. A nobleman went to another country to seek royal power (authority) for himself and gave ten of his servants money in order to carry on his business until he returned. The majority of those servants put the money to work and made more money. One, however, was afraid of the nobleman. He feared his power but did not respect his authority so he hid the money and gave it back when the nobleman returned. His reasons may seem legitimate. The nobleman was harsh and cruel and apparently took what was not his. The point of the story, however, is that if nonbelievers understand the difference between power and authority and do what they are rightfully told to do, then God's people ought to do what God asks all the more. Jesus told that parable to illustrate how we should be about investing the gifts God gives us until Christ returns.

The Apostle Paul summed up God's use of authority in our world by pointing out how often God goes against convention to do his will. God does what appears to be foolish—sending a baby to become the Savior of the world, using compassion instead of might to change lives, and allowing Jesus to die so that death might be conquered. God used weakness to shame those who would use power to get their way. God does all of these things in unconventional ways so that none of us has cause to boast. We recognize it is God who brings goodness into our lives.

God has authority over life and death because God created life and receives it back when we die. God has authority over all of creation because God created everything that is. God has authority over each and every one of us because God is the Lord of life. God does not have to use raw power and intimidation to get our attention. Instead, God chooses to love us into his family, to love us into following him, to love us into life.

In turn, under the authority of God's love, we are empowered to act in the world. We are given gifts that God invites us to use, to invest in our communities and in the lives of other people. With the power of love, God can work through us to make the world into the kingdom of compassion God has always intended it to be. Our true power is found in the grace of God which has come to us in Jesus Christ. May God empower us to live as he lived. Amen.

June 28, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of power and might, we have seen your great works of creation all around us and have felt your transforming presence within us, and we are a changed people because of your grace. We worship you, O God, who brought your people Israel out of captivity in Egypt and who rescued us from our captivity to sin. But we do not praise you because of what you've done for us but because of who you are and because you have called us to be your people.

God of love and compassion, we lift up to you the seemingly endless needs all around us. Our lives are bombarded with images of those who are suffering. Make us not indifferent to their pain but give us strength to respond to and share in it. Help us to see their pain and their need not as judgment upon them but as a challenge for us to extend your mercy and as a call to service. We lift up those in this congregation who are sick, especially those in our hospitals and nursing homes. Help us to demonstrate your love to them in tangible ways, and help us to offer support and encouragement to their families as they share in the pain of someone they love. May we be present for those who mourn and those who are lonely. Give us the words to say that we might bring comfort, and when there are no words that can be said, give us the wisdom simply to remain with them and to share your strength in the midst of their insecurity.

God of peace and comfort, we have experienced brokenness in our world, in our relationships, in our minds and bodies, in our own hearts. As much as we would convince ourselves that we can remain in control, life teaches us so often that we cannot heal ourselves but must rely on the generosity of strangers, the support of loved ones and especially upon your grace. Only you, O Lord, can move in history so that nations and peoples can begin to heal ancient divisions. Only you can open our hearts to trust those in our communities and work places, in our neighborhoods and families so that relationships can begin to mend. Only you can touch the scars from our past, the sting of wounds still open, and our fears about the future which we carry deep in our souls so that we might know respite and begin to find wholeness. Quiet our restless spirits, O God, and teach us in all of the circumstances of our lives to place our trust in you.

O God, you have been our help through the ages. You are our hope for today and for all our days to come. Guard and keep us throughout all of life, and lead us to your eternal kingdom. Amen.

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