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***The Power in Humility***

Luke 7:1-10

Today we baptized **Jacob F. V.**, and we welcomed him into the faith and family of Jesus, the Christ. In a few minutes we will also all join together in Communion, remembering Christ's last supper with his disciples and the words he spoke at that meal over bread and cup that have become formative of who we are as a people of faith. So I would like to offer a few thoughts, perhaps to Jacob as he begins this journey of spiritual development. But obviously I speak more to the rest of us, who today, have all promised to be diligent in raising Jacob (and by extension, all of our children) to know themselves not only as children of God, but also as agents of the kind of love that Jesus modeled for us. So listen in everyone, because one day we might actually truly be called upon by Jacob or another of our children to guide them, and I think these are some important pieces of what we are called to do and teach as Christians.

Let me start with a Theologian named Paul Tillich who once said: "Power is the drive of everything living to realize itself." In the most recent YES! Magazine article, "A Critical Balance," Adam Kahane added: *Such **generative power**, exercised by individuals and groups, makes communities and economies grow, builds organizations and nations, and alters laws and cultures.*

I hope it goes without saying that we all want Jacob, and all the children in our church and lives, to grow up and "realize" themselves! We want them all to come into their God-given **power** and become the glorious and fully alive human beings, "little lights" turning into the "big lights" they are designed to become. To become the architects and writers and doctors and actors and singers and whatever they all feel in themselves... to blossom forth and share the glory of who they are with the world.

Kahane goes on to say, however, what we all also know: that *Power, however, has both a **generative** and creative side and a **degenerative** and destructive one. An individual or group that exercises power to achieve its desires and ambitions, but pays no attention to the desires or ambitions of others, will end up steamrolling the others. This **degenerative power** shows up disturbingly as greed or arrogance, and catastrophically as rapaciousness or violence.*

Every day we hear stories of this degenerative power – of people and systems that are built on greed and motivated by arrogance. Just this week a woman came in looking for assistance. She had a job and a home, but her income level was just above the poverty line, so she wasn't eligible for government assistance, and she and her family simply couldn't make ends meet. Because she and her husband both had jobs, they had two cars... but their incomes weren't enough so they sought assistance. In order to be closer to eligible, they had to get rid of one car... and her husband ended up losing his job. As we talked, I agreed with her that the \$2400 she made each month wasn't a realistic expectation to live on for her family of three. As I

listened to her I just couldn't help but wish that those who made the laws and set the levels would have an experience of living at that income level for six months or a year themselves! Perhaps there is more than a little arrogance and greed in some of the laws of our land.

Kahane explains: *What makes power **degenerative** rather than **generative**? Lack of connection. Tillich he says, referred to **love** as the move toward connection – ‘the drive toward the unity of the separated.’ Such generative love builds – or, more accurately, **reveals** – relationships and interdependence and wholeness.*<sup>1</sup>

I was thinking about this connectedness as I read the scripture from Luke that we just heard. It was partly because the Jewish leaders around Jesus **knew** this Roman centurion personally that they were able to recommend him to Jesus. He had helped them build their temple. They could “vouch” for him as a good man. They were connected - they had a relationship with him already!

By the civil laws of that time, the centurion had another kind of power, right? He had military power. He was a Roman – a member of the occupying government. And he was a centurion – a militarily empowered officer. By rights, he could have had Jesus dragged in to his court by his pony-tail and demanded that Jesus use his abilities to heal his much-“valued” slave. He could have water-boarded him until he agreed to help. He could have locked him up in a Guantanamo-style prison. He could have followed him around with a drone threatening to take his life at any moment. The centurion COULD HAVE used the kind of degenerative power that is based on an assumption of lack of connection, that sees other human beings as somehow less than human, certainly as less valued humans. But we can all guess how effective that would have been. Perhaps that was the very kind of power that caused Jesus his death on the cross.

But I was struck when I read this story – before I had even found this wonderful article by Adam Kahane, by the **humility of the centurion**. And in that humility, I saw such profound connective power. I saw what Kahane calls **generative** power – power that is based on a sense of connection – connection motivated by an innate mutuality. I noticed that the centurion seemed to understand the degenerative potential in the power of might and the generative potential in the power of mutuality, and humbled himself so that new life might happen! I saw, perhaps the love that was in the character of the centurion that “reveals relationships and interdependence and wholeness” that is there all the time, but not always acknowledged.

We live in a world in which this kind of power is growing less and less common – where humility is rare, and divisions of many kinds just seem to be growing. So I believe that what we are doing here today in this worship service is not only important to us in terms of maintaining our church culture and traditions... but also in terms of helping us to feel good about ourselves and our sense of belonging. But I believe what we are doing here today is **vital to the saving of the world**. In a way, what we're doing today with Jacob is Holy Subversion of the major systems of

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<sup>1</sup> Kahane, Adam; *A Critical Balance*, YES! Magazine, Summer 2013, pg. 47

our society and world, because in both baptism and communion, in both of these sacraments of the church, we are affirming our interdependence and connectedness to one another – to ALL OTHERS – no exceptions. On the cover of the bulletin today are these words from our UCC website: “Just some water... just a simple meal of bread and juice... but for us in the United Church of Christ, what is simple means much more!” When we do a baptism, we affirm that God is the active one – that God has taken initiative with this child and claimed him as God’s own. But we also remember that there is no child on this planet that is not claimed by God. Baptism is not God’s way of being selective. It is OUR WAY of affirming God’s grace with the children we know and love and in our own lives. But God’s love isn’t limited to the people we know. God’s love extends to all of humanity. So guess what? Baptism becomes, miraculously, an act in which we are called to understand ourselves as connected to all of humanity – a form of generative love!

And then, when we gather at this table in communion, while we may only be able to see the people around us in this room sharing this particular loaf and cup, this meal represents the **brokenness of all of humanity, and the forgiveness of all sins**, toward the healing, not only of **our** souls, but also of our communities and planet.

The blessing I would wish for Jacob today is the **power in humility, which I believe was the essence of Christ’s generative love**. And please hear me clearly – humility is not the denying of one’s strength and abilities! It is not the diminishment of who we genuinely are. Humility is not dumbing down or hiding the light of our magnificence under a bushel. It is, rather, the grace of knowing that we are connected to all others, and there is none on this planet that deserves love more than another, or deserves peace more than another, or deserves life more than another, or deserves forgiveness more than another. The power in humility is the power of setting aside difference and sometimes might and allowing healing to happen through mutuality, kindness, and understanding. The power in humility was embodied in BOTH the Roman centurion, and in Jesus, in whose name we gather, in whose name we baptize, and in whose name, today, we also break bread.

I need to say one more thing about our sacraments today. These elements are not ever meant to be the end of the road or the end of the conversation or the end of our need for healing and renewal. They are, rather, new STARTS! Because none of us, however intentional we may be about it, ordained or laity, rich or poor, conservative or liberal, male or female, activist or pacifist, NONE OF US is immune to the possibility and probability of hurting others. None of us is incapable of degenerative power – the kind of assertion that rises out of forgetting that we are all human beings and all connected – indeed, we are all related. None of us becomes perfect by the act of baptism or partaking of communion, but rather, each of us is invited, again and again, to remember that we are loved and forgiven, when we gather to baptize another, and when we take this bread. Each of us is invited, in these sacraments, to return to the power in humility which affirms us as one family in God and to know that **we are beloved and we are called to be loving!** In these ways, we will participate with God in changing and healing this broken and struggling world.

Let us do so today with humble and thankful hearts! Amen.