

# LOVE AND POWER

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham

Sunday, January 16, 2005

The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

## READING

Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites -- polar opposites -- so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love.

We've got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our times.

--Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Presidential Address, So. Christian Leadership Conf., 1967

All of us go through times of feeling powerless, even helpless. Sometimes such moments are full of life-changing possibilities.

The first time I entered a Unitarian Universalist meetinghouse, for example, I felt about as despairing about the state of the world and as helpless over the course of my own life as I had ever felt. It was just after Dr. King had been killed. The cities of America were burning. I was a senior in college, struggling with what to do with my life. The war in Vietnam was raging. And my Harvard classmates and I had decided to break with tradition and invite our own speaker -- not someone chosen by the university -- to address us at our graduation. Robert Kennedy had said he would do it. Then, in early '68, when Lyndon Johnson decided not to run for re-election after all, Kennedy had told us he couldn't come to Cambridge in June after all; he'd be in California, running for President. Dr. King had agreed to be our speaker. Two weeks later he was killed.

Some of my closest friends in college had grown up in Unitarian homes. So when King was killed I went to the Unitarian church in Harvard Square, where a spontaneous speak-out was taking place. I didn't much listen. What I did was stare at a plaque on the wall, which bore a good motto for a church devoted to religion but not to creed. The words of the prophet Micah: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

Exactly a year to the day before he was killed, on April 4, 1967, Dr. King had spoken from the pulpit of New York's Riverside Church, with a prophetic warning against what he called the intertwined spiritual dangers in American society: racism, materialism, and militarism. And he called for us to withdraw our troops from Vietnam. Many of his own allies in civil rights did want him to do that. But King saw that young people of color were disproportionately being sent to die fighting other people of color.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the co-founders of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, said that Americans don't like the hard questions that the prophets raise. Instead we invert them, asking, "What do *I* require in a God, a cause, a community I'd bother with?" Heschel also said that because they raise question about how power is being used, the prophets are often ignored, or silenced, or even killed. When that happens, he warned, there is no solution to be found in isolated individuals. The only solution is to be found in communities that attempt to live in the questions that the prophets raise, not pretending to have all the answers, but keeping the questioning spirit alive.

Sitting in that meetinghouse, I began to ask if something was not required of me. Something having to do with building up communities devoted to prophetic questions. Less than a year later, I was applying to Divinity School, as a Unitarian Universalist.

Dr. King went to college and seminary, in the decade just after World War II, when I was just a child. It was a time when America was fatigued by a power struggle with fascism and wary of one emerging against communism. White America was moving to the suburbs, and its religious leaders were not talking much about power, but about love. Making religion largely a matter of personal and private piety, not of public issues about the use and abuse of power.

Evangelist Billy Graham began his great crusades, preaching the love of Jesus. The Catholic message, represented by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, on his TV program, “Life is Worth Living,” talked more about sacraments and saints, but sounded a similar note. So did “The Lutheran Hour,” where every issue was resolved by God’s love and grace. Best-selling books included Norman Vincent Peale’s *Power of Positive Thinking*, Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman’s *Peace of Mind*, and humanist Erich Fromm’s *The Art of Loving*.

A few theologians were doing better, like Paul Tillich, in his book, *Love, Power and Justice*, or the Unitarian Henry Nelson Wieman, in *The Source of Human Good*. King wrote his dissertation on them. He had also absorbed the radical form of love represented by Gandhi’s example of non-violent confrontations with injustice through the use of soul power, moral power; through what Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams also called ‘the power of organization and the organization of power,’ which King used in campaigns from the Montgomery bus boycott, the Selma march – where Unitarian minister James Reeb died, and where the interfaith leaders were organized by Unitarian president Dana Greeley – down through the final campaign in Memphis.

In his own books, like *Strength to Love*, as in his life, King gave radical power to the meaning of non-violent love. But by the 1970s, the accent in America was on power, Personal power: the personal as the political. Black power. Feminist power. Youth power. Gay power. Often with little love lost between competing oppressions. Weakening many forms of coalition between progressive and moderate Americans.

I remember, for example, beginning my ministry in 1973, in Knoxville, TN. Serving a congregation that had been organized two decades before as the only racially integrated church in the community. The desegregation sit-ins had been organized there. Many leaders of the black community were member: the only black state representative from the county; the only black city councilman; the only black school principal. But by the y0s, pressured by black nationalists to stick to their own, and seeing white liberals becoming more preoccupied with the ‘Me Decade’ than with justice, they were leaving. Meanwhile, the women’s group broke into four factions – from traditionalists to radical feminists. And when we gave space to a gay-lesbian group, four good ole boys in a pick-up shot out all the church windows one night.

Most of white, male, Christian, patriarchal America didn't overtly embrace hate, of course. It didn't need to. It already had power. It kept preaching 'love.' But it changed its tactics, to preserve its power. Evangelicals who'd always stayed out of power politics, jumped in with both feet. Politically, the Bible belt switched parties. Economically, many embraced a gospel of free market fundamentalism, as though any public, rather than private, effort to help the once excluded or the vulnerable was somehow anti-Christian.

Meanwhile, much of what we now know as 'Blue state America' has become either individualistic 'spiritual' without being religious, often focused on loving attitudes more than on the power of organizing that love until it becomes justice; or else so secular and alienated that it has ceded to its right wing opponents all power of interpretation over the central icons of our culture. So that many forget that flag should signify the Bill of Rights; and Motherhood and Family Values should mean women are full moral agents in determining whether to become mothers, and with whom; that it's love makes a family, not tradition, and that marriage is the power of the state used to protect those who love. But most all, we forget that the Bible is not an idol or a weapon of oppression except when used that way be fear-mongers – it's all about the Source of all love and freedom, the Cosmic Liberal, and about the enduring questions of moral imagination posed by the prophets and by rabbi Jesus.

King knew that. His speeches persuaded because they rang with the ideals of our founders, the words of the prophets, and with phrases from Unitarian abolitionists and their hymns, like Theodore Parker saying, "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice!"

What we white liberals have to relearn, I think, is that well-intentioned, open, loving attitudes aren't enough. As the latest issue of the *UU World*, our denominational magazine put it, we have a power problem; because we have more than we may think. Since we distrust power, like to deny we have it. But we UUs have the highest levels of education, and of income, of any religious group in America. Not uniformly. Thank God we have some diversity of class and economics. But when it comes to patterns and structures of exclusion and oppression, it is not enough for us individual or even collectively to say, "I'm not prejudiced." We need to use some of our power not only to

face down injustice and hate, but also to work on dismantling racism, sexism, heterosexism, and privilege based on being temporarily young or physically able.

It doesn't have to be a big deal, I've learned. The relinquishments of privilege don't have to be threatening. I think of Buffy Duhig's uncle, Duncan Howlett, as minister of our church in Washington, DC, resigning so the church could call its first African-American minister. When I left office as president of the UUA, the three candidates to succeed me would all have been firsts: an African-American, a woman, and gay man.

It was Coretta Scott King who spoke at my college graduation, giving her first public address after her husband's death. Bill Sinkford, my successor at the UUA, and the first African American minister to head a largely white denomination, was there, too. And we are pleased that Mrs. King has joined us both in signing a simple statement that "because marriage is basic human right and an individual choice . . . the State should not interfere with same-gender couples who choose to marry and share fully and equally in the rights, responsibilities, and commitment of civil marriage."

Because when we get this right, power isn't power over, it's power with and for. It's love implementing the demands of justice. And then justice is power correcting everything that stands against love.

May that truth guide us, and then help us to guide the uniting of love and power in those whom we love, in our places of work, and in the life of our community and world. Amen and amen.