

# Sunday, May 16, 2021

## Real Power

The Rev. Dr. John Leech

Back in seminary one of my pals used to phone home and fill in his friends on the latest episode of their favorite prime-time soap opera, which they received six weeks later than the broadcast in the United States.

In the TV show there were, among other characters, a father and two sons. One son ran the family business, the other ran his mouth. And one day the jealous son complained to his father, "Daddy, you gave JR all the power!" and Jock replied, "Bobby, real power is something you take!"

Words not to live by.

My friend didn't. Nor his country's spiritual leader, Desmond.

Back then his home country, South Africa, lived under an oppressive regime that practiced apartness, apartheid, which segregated some sections of the population from others less privileged.

He went back home, dangerous as it was, after receiving a master's degree, to honor his father, who was in his last years, even months, of life, and to serve his country, which was in its latest extremity as well.

At the time 'the gun' was considered as an option. But, that is not what worked.

Years later, speaking to clergy in San Francisco, Desmond Tutu, explained that active nonviolent resistance, and our sympathetic boycott, had been effective.

This was good news to me. I'd watched over four hundred of my peers in college get themselves arrested for trespassing after they occupied the administration building to call for divestment of university funds from the apartheid nation. It only made the local paper.

Desmond, in that talk to fellow preachers, said that like many preachers that he had only one sermon. His was, "God loves you." The challenger was in the implications.

God loves you. Then what? For followers of Desmond, and my friend for that matter, it meant standing for justice.

And that brings us back to Bobby, JR, and Jock, the characters in *Dallas*, the Texas soap opera. Real power, it turns out, is not something you take away from others. It may be, even, something you give them. By showing another way.

By their active nonviolent resistance - a challenging option - the protesters, boycotters, and survivors of apartheid had shown those opposed to them, and to the world, another way.

Theologian Walter Wink, an advocate of active nonviolent resistance, wrote about the 'powers that be' that through institutional violence dominate the world as it is. (Think of Pilate and Herod and the occupying powers of Rome.)

But domination of the 'powers that be', that exert 'power over' others, cannot last in the face of the force of love.

What is real power?

As the Apostle Paul wrote, "God put [his] power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion." And that power can be "at work in us, that is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." (Ephesians 1:19-21, 3:20)

Real power comes from the Cross, the Redeemer, and it comes from the Spirit, the Sustainer and Sanctifier, and it comes from the Creator. Real power creates, sustains, repairs, and brings to fullness the life of the world. Real power brings to fullness; calls to creation to become truly what it was meant to be, calls us to become what we are truly meant to be. It is the way of love.

We have a ways to go.

Sometimes the way of love is very tiring. Sometimes we need to sit still and know that God is God, that Christ is risen, the Lord is king - and those powers that be are not really in charge.

The justice that we seek must be found within as well as outside; as we do justice we will seek mercy.

God loves you. What are the implications of that for you: for you personally, as a congregation, as a community? as a citizen, a believer, a seeker? a brother, a husband, a sister, a mother, a wife, a child of God?

God is love. How do we live that out?

One last story about my friend.

He had two sons. The younger one reminded me of their mother. The older one reminded me more of his father, especially, at the age of four, in his passionate obstinacy.

One day feeling thwarted about something his father had told him to do (or not to do) he called down to his father from the top of the stairs,

"I hate you Daddy!" His father responded. "Yes, I know, but I love you, son."

"But I hate you Daddy!" Obstinate. "Yes, I know, but I love you son." Even more obstinate.

Is there no greater love than that love of a parent for his child, of God for his children?

For God so loved the world that as his own creation turned against him still he took on human nature himself, subject to all the unthinking hate and unending division of our condition, and told us the truth about love. And hate.

"Yes, I know, but I love you."

That elder son, a father now himself, learned to live those words; will we?