



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

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"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

One of the most complicated and confounding dynamics in human society certainly must be that of power. Power. What do you think of when you hear the word? Perhaps you might think of the power of God, the power which was evidenced in creation and in a myriad of ways ever since. Or you might think of the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which launched the Christian Church.

Or you might see power as a dangerous force in our world; where those who have the power often seem to demean and even abuse those under their control. Turn to any newscast, and you will hear stories of the abuse of power.

Power is part and parcel of every human relationship, every organizational chart, every Christian congregation, every unit of government, every national and international partnership. With the United States being the only superpower in the world today, that power is front and center in every dealing with the rest of the world. Tension is always present in deciding whether power should be "power-over" or "power-with."

Whenever we talk about power, Lord Acton's famous line always comes to mind, "power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely." We would always like to believe that he was wrong, but thousands of anecdotal images each day on the news suggest otherwise. And there does not seem to be any doubt of the accuracy of the claim that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." Anytime a person, an organization, a nation has absolute power, history suggests, very little good comes from it, and usually a whole lot of evil.

We don't have to look at power only through the macro lens, but we can start right at home. Power is constantly being worked out and exercised right inside of our own home and family. Every marriage seeks to find a proper balance of power between husband and wife, and as most marriage partners will agree, there is enough ambiguity to cause occasional struggles.

Parents and children are always trying to find the proper balance of power. When a child is very young the parent has almost unlimited power, but as the child grows that power is diminished. Sometimes when the child becomes

a teenager the power is almost reversed, often beyond what is desirable.

Power is a constant companion in all business and work-place relationships. Some people have more power than others, and that power can be administered with equanimity or with an arbitrary and capricious spirit. I have worked for employers who have grasped and hoarded power like it is the Holy Grail, and I have worked for others who have consistently tried to empower others. When I was in a leadership position, I always found power to be a bit heady while at the same time fraught with pitfalls.

The church has always struggled with issues of power. If you want a case in point just read Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. What a mess that was! Pastors and laypersons have spent an inordinate amount of time trying to find a workable power relationship. I remember one predecessor body of the ELCA where every year at the annual meeting the congregation voted on whether the pastor's call should be renewed for another year. The power of the congregation was rather absolute.

In other situations, pastors and staff have accumulated the dominant (and often domineering) position of power, trumping the power even of the elected leadership. This has been especially prevalent in nondenominational churches, where precedents and protocols are made up as they go. But no matter the church organization, there is usually sufficient ambiguity in the system so that dustups over the issue of power will always be commonplace.

America's founding fathers were so concerned about issues of power and especially the abuse of power that they created three independent and interdependent branches of government; the executive, legislative and judicial. It was presumed that the three of these would remain quite independent and provide checks and balances to the others. As discerning as our founders were, I don't think any of them realized how difficult these issues of power would become when government came to include millions of people and trillions of dollars.

The Scriptures have quite a bit to say about power, and I think it is helpful to revisit some of these passages. The initial claim of the Bible is that God has awesome power. Not only did God create the heavens and the earth, but God is at work protecting and saving the people.

Moses sings this famous song in Exodus 15 after the Israelites have been set free from oppression: *Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom: you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you, you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.*

But we also find that God shares power; God empowers leaders. For instance, King Saul is anointed by Samuel with the words, *The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them: and you will be changed into a different person.* Or later in I Samuel 16, this also happens to David through Samuel; *the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power.*

In the book of Isaiah, we find that the power of God is now going to be given to his servant, the suffering servant, the Messiah. Isaiah 11:2 - *The spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and power, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.*

And then, most remarkably, the power of God is promised to people just like us, especially those of us who are weak and tired. Isaiah 40:28-31 - *Do you not know, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak, even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength like eagles, they will run and not grow weary and they will walk and not be faint.*

In the New Testament it is clear that Jesus receives the power of God. In his baptism, the voice says that all power and authority has been given to him. But then Jesus seeks to give that power away. Luke 9 - *When Jesus had called the twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out demons and to cure diseases and he sent them out to preach the kingdom.*

Acts 10:38 continues: *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power and he went around doing*

*good and healing all those who were under the power of the devil, because God was with them.*

We are also told that there is incredible power in the Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Romans 1 - *For I am not ashamed of the Gospel...for it is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes.* Martin Luther would later find his "aha" in these verses from Romans 1:16-17.

Later on we find that power comes through the cross and the resurrection. I Cor 1:18 - *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Later in Phil 3:20 - *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so somehow to attain to the resurrection of the dead.*

And then we have this amazing passage in Acts 1:8 where Jesus promises power to the church, to us: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses to the whole world.*

And finally, the Scriptures tell us that even God, even Jesus Christ limited their power for the sake of the world. There is the very clear message that whoever in this world has power, that power should be self-limited for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of the world. Those powerful words in Philippians 2 speak to us: *Jesus did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.*

In 2 Cor 12 these amazing words: *Jesus said, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* Jesus limits his power for the sake of his grace. Paul continues: *Therefore I will boast gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. This is why for Christ's sake I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardship, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

The biblical call is for all who have authority and power to limit that power, and to empower others. Whoever has power in the home, the church, the business place, the school, the athletic field, the government, that power should be limited for the sake of others, for the sake of the world. Power is not something to be grasped, but rather to be given away. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. But power which is given away is a Christ-like way of lifting others and changing the world.