



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

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"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (I Cor 1:3).

One editorial writer I like to read is David Brooks, who now writes for The New York Times. His entertaining book of a few years ago, Bobos in Paradise, was helpful in understanding trends in America, especially the chapter on spiritual life. I have tried to follow his articles, even though I disagree with him often. This past week he wrote a very provocative and enlightening piece.

By way of introduction, Brooks has been a strong supporter of the war in Iraq, but is now having second thoughts. He writes, "This has been a crushingly depressing period, especially for people who support the war. The predictions people on my side made about the postwar world have not yet come true. The warnings others made about the fractious state of post-Saddam society have. It's still too soon to declare the Iraq mission a failure."

"Nonetheless, it's not too early to begin to think about what was clearly an intellectual failure. There was, above all, a failure to understand the consequences of our power. (My underlining). There was a failure to anticipate the response our power would have on the people we sought to liberate. They resent us for our power and at the same time expect us to be capable of everything."

"There was also a failure to understand the effect our power would have on other people around the world. We were so sure we were using our might for noble purposes, we assumed that sooner or later, everybody would see that as well. Far from being blinded by greed, we were blinded by idealism."

Brooks then comes to a poignant conclusion, "We didn't understand the tragic irony that our power is also our weakness. As long as we seemed so mighty, even those we were aiming to assist were bound to revolt. They would do so for their own self-respect. In taking out Saddam, we robbed the Iraqis of the honor of liberating themselves. The fact that they had no means to do so is beside the point."

Listen carefully to his words, "our power is our weakness." God says, as quoted by the Apostle Paul, "My power is made perfect in weakness." But that is not what Brooks is talking about. He is saying that America's

power is its weakness, that power itself has an inherent weakness. For a society in which power is so highly valued, this is a shock.

Our power is our weakness. Think about how this affects America's place in the world? Think about how this influences the minds and hearts of the have-nots in the world when they respond to the haves. What implications does this realization have upon Christians who control such significant power? How does this affect the ELCA, which has grown itself through mergers from some small and relatively modest denominations into a huge five million member organization? How does this affect Lutheran Church of Hope, which is fast becoming one of the largest congregations in the country?

As Brooks asserts, "There is a failure to recognize the effect our power has on other people. We are so sure that if we use this power for noble purposes, everyone else will see it the same way."

Power creates such ambiguity. Remember the old adage "absolute power corrupts absolutely." Welcome to Saddam's world, for instance. Wherever in history there has been unbridled power, that power ultimately corrupts. Furthermore, to quote another adage, "the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history." One empire after another down through the centuries has been corrupted by power.

The ancient Greeks were brilliant wordsmiths, and they created a word to describe such corruption. The word is "hubris." Hubris, which can be seen as arrogance or condescension, is often an effort to appear God-like. Such attitudes often unleash denigration or even violence on those who have less power.

A writer named Bob Wallace suggests the almost inevitable results of hubris, "Such people become grandiose, seeing themselves as immensely important. Since they are so important, they cannot be wrong. Therefore, all problems are projected onto other people. Hubris leads the afflicted to become paranoid about all these bad people, since they have become the cause of all problems. They have to be ferreted out and destroyed."

When you think of "hubris" today, who in our world comes to mind? A few on my list include:

- Top Executives at Enron, who destroyed a company and the livelihoods of thousands
- Martha Stewart, who for a mere pittance broke the law and cost herself untold anguish
- President Bill Clinton in his behavior with the intern
- Donald Rumsfeld, who drowned out all voices who questioned his war planning
- Bobby Knight, who denigrates and abuses anyone who doesn't do his bidding
- Catholic Priests and occasional Lutheran pastors who abuse children
- Prison guards at Abu Ghraib and anyone else who authorize torture of prisoners
- Donald Trump, just because he is Donald Trump

Hubris is ubiquitous. It happens in the board room, the playground, the classroom, in families, in churches, in schools. Those who have some power now lord it over those who have less power. We all understand this dynamic and have experienced it. However, where Brooks goes further is by saying that power by its very nature seems to create hubris, at least in the eyes of others. Even people or institutions which are exceedingly careful to use power in caring and benevolent ways still are often perceived as exhibiting hubris.

I remember a large church in Minneapolis which very generously contributed to an inner city ministry. However the inner city ministry was on shaky ground because of a lack of leadership. Some people from the ministry criticized the large church for just sending money, not becoming personally involved. In response the large church agreed to offer some people to sit on the board of directors of the ministry, and give some much needed leadership.

But soon the people from the ministry were criticizing the large church for "taking over" the ministry, for hubris. Finally the whole thing broke apart, and the people from the inner city ministry asked members of the large congregation to withdraw and in the future just send money. Power creates enormous ambiguity and resistance.

So an obvious question for people of Lutheran Church of Hope is how we should respond to our growing power and influence. Having been a senior pastor of a very large church I learned early how quickly we became resented and caricatured. Even though we believed we were acting out of altruism and servanthood, others saw our power as hubris. In effect, as Brooks suggest, our power was our weakness. Even those who wanted our

help resented us.

The same thing will inevitably happen with Hope. I have already overheard some resentment from smaller congregations in the community toward this large and powerful and fast-growing mega church. Our power becomes our weakness. There is often a failure to recognize the effect our power has on other people around the church. We are so sure that using our power for noble purposes, we assume that everyone else will see it the same way.

So what can we do about this situation? My own sense is that we will never eliminate such perceptions, but we can take some actions to minimize the effect. Below I list the "top ten" responses we might make. Each of these could fill up an entire Update, but I just list them today without elaboration.

1. It's not about us. As we sing, "All about You." Down deep we need to continue to believe that it is not about us. It's not about Hope. It's about God in Jesus Christ.
2. As Jesus is described in Philippians 1, "*we empty ourselves, taking the form of a servant.*"
3. As a church we need to be transparent in all of our dealings, especially financial. Secrets become power trips.
4. Hope has already decided to only grow as large as this site will allow, then start new congregations. Our growth is finite.
5. Power is understood as power under and power with, not power over. The task of leaders is not to amass power, but to empower others.
6. We seek partnerships with other Christians and churches.
7. We live by grace through faith and therefore are grace-filled toward others.
8. Our competition is never other Christians or churches, we are one in Christ.
9. They will know we are Christians by our love. We love because God first loved us.
10. This congregation belongs to God, not to us. God was here before we arrived and will be here long after we are gone. God is the owner.

Have a great Memorial Day weekend.