

The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

July 5, 2009

Proper 9B/Ordinary 14B/Pentecost 5

2 Samuel 5:1-10

Mark 6:1-13

“Power”

Rev Jeffrey Cheifetz

2 Samuel 5:1-10

5Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, “Look, we are your bone and flesh. 2For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” 3So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel. 4David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. 5At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years. 6The king and his men marched to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, “You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back” —thinking, “David cannot come in here.” 7Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion, which is now the city of David. 8David had said on that day, “Whoever would strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates.” Therefore it is said, “The blind and the lame shall not come into the house.” 9David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inwards. 10And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.

Mark 6:1-13

6He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. 4Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” 5And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. 7He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you,

as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” 12So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. 13They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Swedenborg Passage: In the spiritual world truth from good is the source of all power, and falsity from evil has no power whatever. This is because the Divine Itself in heaven is Divine good and Divine truth, and all power belongs to the Divine. Falsity from evil is powerless because truth from good is the source of all power, and in falsity from evil there is nothing of truth from good. Consequently in heaven there is all power, and none in hell; for everyone in heaven is in truths from good, and everyone in hell is in falsities from evil. For no one is admitted into heaven until he is in truths from good, neither is any one cast down into hell until he is in falsities from evil." (*Heaven and Hell (Ager) n. 539*)

POWER is the ability to effect change or exert control over either things or people, subjects or objects. (Wikipedia)

Power is a measure of an entity's ability to control the environment around itself, including the behavior of other entities. (Wikipedia)

Other terms related to aspects of this idea are "authority", "influence", "persuasion", "charisma", "tradition", "domination".

Power is expressed by means of delegated authority, social class (material wealth can equal power), personal or group charisma, expertise (ability, skills), knowledge, money (financial influence, control of labour, control through ownership, etc), fame, force (violence, military might, coercion), moral persuasion (including religion), group dynamics (such as public relations), and in relationships.

POWER is a word that elicits mixed feelings. We like to have power: control over our lives, the ability to convince others about the rightness of what we believe in, the ability to purchase what we want when we want. When people like us, believe in us, treat us with some degree of deference, even obey us, then we feel secure, strong. When we have enough money in the bank, a secure job, happy intimate relationships, good health, then we feel good and grounded; all is right with the world. When we are growing in our spiritual life, when we feel close to God, when we are able to communicate our thoughts and feelings with adroitness and clarity, then feel secure.

Children and youth learn about power, its use and misuse, through play, video games, television shows, and their relationships with their parents and schoolmates. Adults are better able to conceptualize their ideas about power, but often no more able to discern how to use it rightly than are children.

Racial minority populations have a much more accurate view of how power is actually used rightly and wrongly in political and economic ways than does the majority population. American white males are too often unaware of the power we have because we are so used to its privileges that we are like fish swimming in water, unable to see the water itself. It is difficult to believe and internalize the stories we hear from racial minorities about their life experiences as individuals and groups because they do not fit our preconceived notions of how life works; or, we feel guilty, which can morph into anger, which doesn't help anyone.

A memory: some time last year I walked into our local Bank of America, and went past a tall guy at the little desk writing his deposit slip. I walked past him and got into line - no problem. Suddenly he walked up to and past me, with a right arm extended to brush me out of the way. He never touched me. For some reason I backed away and stood behind him without comment. But I was shocked at his action, and wordless, and very angry. And what could I do? Cause a scene? Say, "I was here first?". I did nothing; maybe I said something meant to be sarcastic, but if he heard me, he made no sign. I gave away my power to someone else, for whatever reason, and that has bothered me ever since.

A definition: The term "hyper power" has been used in some circles to refer to a state that is militarily, economically and technologically dominant on the world stage. The Roman Empire, the British Empire, the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great, and Ancient China are considered to be the most potent examples of previous hyperpowers. In academic international relations literature, the term hegemony is much more common. In a modern context, it is used to describe the United States.

An experience: This clergy shirt makes me stand out, especially on the street. When I wear it in public, inevitably I am mistaken for a Catholic priest, and am addressed as "Father". When it happened for the very first time, I tried to explain that I was a dad, but not a Father, and elicited only anger because I was seen as being flippant. Another time, I caused confusion, because who else but a Catholic or Episcopal priest wears one of these things in public? So I gave up, and from then on have been more likely to nod sagely at the speaker and bestow a blessing on the run, like "Peace".

POWER is like money. We are not supposed to covet it, seek it, or use it wrongly. We are skittish even talking about it. Other people have it, but we say that we do not have it, we say, *I* am not powerful. It is not spiritual to go after it, to amass it, collect it, hoard it. Because we deny that we have it, we just see it as dangerous, and toxic to our spiritual well-being. If we admit that we do indeed have power, then it becomes far too easy to believe that we create it, own it,

have a right to it. Then we have to protect it from others, by whatever means. And that takes us away from loving God with all our heart, strength, mind, and soul; and from loving our neighbor as ourselves. We believe that we will forget to live like Jesus, who, as St Paul wrote in Philippians 2:6-8: "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Weak in the eyes of society rather than strong, humble and humbled rather than lifted up and exalted, a servant rather than a ruler, death on a cross rather than placed on a throne of power.

So, you and I believe an untruth, that we have no power, and thus live in denial. We believe that it is safer, and more spiritual, to live this way. And at the same time, we ascribe power to others, and thus live in anxiety. Which is not much fun.

The truth is that as human beings, we have power. Power to make choices. Power to love and hate, to live into what we know to be true and to ignore it. We have the power to include and exclude the stranger. We have the ability to change our minds on political issues, to choose one task over another, to influence people's reactions. As an example of the latter, last night while sitting in my living room, the sudden screech of a noisy fireworks out on the street caused me to physically flinch, and neighborhood dogs to begin barking.

One of the aspects of the text in Samuel is the taking on of power and authority by David as he became king. (Previous to this text is the long story of King Saul's inability to use his authority wisely, resulting in his death and David's ascendancy.) The story is that the tribes convinced David that he was the one meant to have that office. So they made an agreement, a covenant, to that effect. He was king for 40 years - which number can mean a time of spiritual completion, of fulfillment - during which time he learned how to use the power he had at his disposal, for both good and evil. We read that his army took the well-defended city of Jebus, later called Jerusalem, from its inhabitants, using a hidden route, a water conduit, to enter the city and surprise the defenders. Thus he answered their taunt, "even the blind and the lame will turn you back". He took the city, renamed it after himself, strengthened its defenses and increased its size. The City of David became known as the Holy Mountain, Mount Zion, the city of the great king; that is, the center of spiritual, economic, and political power.

The tragedy of King David, and other kings of the Old Testament period, is that power too often corrupted and distracted them, and they misused it, this harming the people, and destroying their personal relationship with God. This is

one source of our cautionary approach to the very notion of power. It is too easily mishandled, and the bearers of power must take responsibility for their stewardship - or lack of same - of their resources.

Then there is the curious story about Jesus when he came to his hometown, fresh from his travels. He found that he was unable to use his power because the people who knew him best were unable to see him as more than the guy down the street. Jesus without power, with a few exceptions without the ability to heal, change lives, bring salvation! All because, we are told, the people of his hometown "took offense at him" ("who does he think he is? We know him - he used to play with my children when he was young; he's the carpenter who fixed my dining table; his family still lives down this street right here; his dad died young").

Ever have that feeling? That even with your admirable abilities, your winning personality, your skill in your job, your network of friendships, you are having absolutely no effect? Nobody really listens to you? You've lost your game?

I had that feeling last Sunday, when I was part of the worship service that celebrated the 100th anniversary of my former church in Washington state. I served there for 13 years as associate pastor, and left just over 10 years ago. Despite many good memories of my time there, there were also less pleasant memories. As was true for some years when I worked there, the energy in that sanctuary was not life-giving to me. I was glad to be there on that day, to see still-familiar faces, to listen to the choir, but I no longer belonged, I no longer had power, or position. As a pastor, once one leaves a church, everything shifts, as it should, and one cannot, and perhaps one should not, go home again.

My experience at this Swedenborgian denomination's national meeting, referred to as "Convention", brought home the ambiguous nature of power and potency, of energy and purpose. There were, when clergy and laity were all present, maybe 120 people. That's 10% of your denomination's membership. What I saw and heard was a combination of celebration and joy about being together, exhortations to keep trying new ways of doing church, a treasuring of the theological richness brought into the world by Swedenborg, concern about the future of the denomination, and thoughtfulness about the God-given role of Swedenborgian churches in their communities. Smallness isn't a bad thing in itself; there are many advantages to being small in number. But, unless there is confidence in a chosen path or purpose or use in the world, then concern about survival can take over and suck the energy out of the room. What is our power, our role, our use? How can we be potent, influential, life-giving in ministry? What blocks or saps our energy?

We are celebrating the independence of this country this weekend. Music, story, song, poetry, speeches, an endless supply of fireworks, spectacle, all combine to lift our spirits, remind us of where we have come from and who we are. And, by the way to remind us that though we are in the midst of a dispiriting recession, there is yet hope, because we are, by the way, Americans, inheritors of a proud tradition, members of a world power, immigrants and the children of immigrants who together have built a colossus. Power. Potency in the world. Exemplar of justice and human rights, inventiveness and creativity, freedom and equality.

And, though I very glad indeed that I am a citizen of the United States, I am still the patriotic critic; or is it a critic of patriotism? I perhaps too easily see the underside. I see what is missing, what has not yet been attained, the gap between ideal and actual, the misuse of world power, the arrogance of the super state. Take me to a fireworks show, and I see the darkness in between the sparkling lights. What a downer, right? Well, perhaps I can learn, still, to appreciate equally the strengths AND weaknesses of my native country.

Let's look at our own lives for a moment: do you have power? YES. What is your power? How do you express it? Where does it manifest itself? Where is it stuck?

Look at the life of this congregation, of the Hillside congregation, of other congregations: what is the heart song, the soul, the spirit of this congregation? How is it influencing the life of the larger community? What is as yet untapped?

Will there be times when we will feel that power, potency, giftedness, that is ours to contribute, and know that it is being used in uplifting, life-giving ways? YES. Will there be times when we feel powerless, useless, unable, weak? YES.

In both of today's texts we see unexpected things happening to David, and to Jesus and his disciples. There will be days when we wonder just what the heck we are doing, and days when we shine and we know it. The point is that this is beyond us. The people of ancient Israel came to David and said, "Hey, this is our moment. This is your moment. Own what has been given to you. Take on what we want to give to you. Step into your proper place. Use what you have been given." And he did.

Jesus came home to continue his ministry, and very little happened. People were not receptive to his true nature, and thus to what he could give. So he sent out his disciples in pairs to do what he could not; or, perhaps, to multiply what he could have done in other places. In any case, it was time for them to experience for themselves both the power and the weakness that is part of taking on a great task. And they did. In some places they had to turn away; in other places, they were able to do wonderful things for people.

The point is that David, and Jesus, and Jesus' disciples, showed up and trusted in the power that had called them to a particular use to guide them. Some days that power seemed absent and impotent. Sometimes it was palpable, compelling, effective.

We are no different. Show up, be faithful, trust in the Lord to use you, or not. It is not, really, about us and our ability and winning personality. It is about what the Lord wants and needs to have happen in this world through us. We are channels of grace, vessels of love and truth, connections to the divine.

And that is enough.

So be it. Amen.