

Homily - The Kingdom of God vs. The Powers of the World

Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt

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After WWII, the city of Berlin was divided into two zones: East Berlin governed by the Soviets under communist rule and West Berlin, an outpost of freedom governed by a democratic government. The eastern half of the city deteriorated under the Soviet Union's repression of freedom. As a result, over 3.5 million people escaped into West Germany. Drained of its best and brightest people, the East Germans built a 96-mile long wall in August of 1961 to stop the flow of migration to the West. However, the East German government claimed that the Wall was being built to keep the fascists out of their country. This of course was a big lie.

In 1977, I traveled with a group of university students to study in Germany for the summer. We stopped in West Berlin for a few days to see the sights. A few of us decided to take a day trip through Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin. Once on the other side, we were searched by the East German guards who treated us harshly and required us to convert German marks into East German money. Not having any particular plan, we boarded a train and headed into the center of the city. The train was silent and we could tell that people were staring at us. But when we looked directly at them, they turned their heads. During the entire time, we were followed by the Secret Police. East Berlin turned out to be grey and grim. Our lunch consisted of bad cafeteria food and our drinks were flavored with artificial sweetener. The only appealing items for sale were toys and books for young children and so we never got to spend all of our converted money. As we passed back through the checkpoint into West Berlin, my heart was heavy. I remarked to my friends: "This is a hopeless situation. These people will never taste freedom."

Some 12 years later on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down after a hastily arranged international press conference in East Berlin. I, along with the rest of the world, were taken by surprise! I had forgotten that with God, all things are possible. I had forgotten the parable of the seeds. Crowds of Germans began dismantling the Berlin Wall—a barrier that for almost 30 years had symbolized the Cold War division of Europe. Crowds gathered on both sides of the historic crossings, cheering and celebrating while bulldozers tore down portions of the Wall during the following weeks. It seemed surreal that such a monstrous structure could crumble overnight. But in retrospect, conditions for East Germany's survival had already vanished due to a lack of support by its citizens in addition to significant economic and political challenges. The seeds of demise had been planted years before; the harvest was now ready.

Despite the policy of state atheism in East Germany, a congregation called 'St. Nicholas' had met for prayer since 1982. Over the next seven years, the church's congregation grew, despite authorities' barricading the adjacent streets. Peaceful candlelit marches

often took place following its services. Finally, on October 9, 1989, one month before the fall of the Berlin Wall, 70,000 people, filled with faith and courage, assembled for a peaceful candlelit march. Incredibly, not a single shot was fired. This was the Kingdom of God in action.

In today's gospel, Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how...But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29)

Jesus also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." (Mark 4:30-32)

These two parables remind us of what can happen under God's reign: 1) That there is a dynamic, vital power at work in the world, above and beyond our ego strength alone; a power that is mysteriously beyond our comprehension and mightier than the sword and 2) that small beginnings can yield great outcomes. "The Kingdom of God is like a peaceful candlelit march, shining a light on the big lie, creating an opening for the walls to come tumbling down." (KFS+) Today I would like to focus on the Kingdom of God vs. the Powers of the world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. I will use some of Walter Wink's material [Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination](#).

Since about 6000 years ago, when the first human civilizations were born, world culture has been seeped in a Domination System: an embedded way of thinking and acting where power is hoarded, money is loved, nationalism is honored, the poor are oppressed, minorities are marginalized, and the cycle of violence is perpetrated. In this world, many are vying to be the winners, bragging about their superiority, and seeking the top positions. We call this way of walking in the world "the old humanity" or the "Domination System." Consciously or ignorantly, we are all part of this Domination System.

While this "old humanity" appears to work for those at the top, it is life depleting for those who find themselves at the bottom. This "old humanity" is still the dominant way our political system operates-on both sides of the aisle! Many of our elected officials have become dishonest and corrupt, more interested in being re-elected than striving for the good of the commonwealth. The Bottom Line is this: The inner spirituality of our government and many of our institutions is "fallen," blind to the will of the God.

For instance, our health care system is being dominated by the Insurance Agencies, Pharmaceutical Companies, and a Hospital Industry who seem to prioritize making

money over treating people for their illnesses. Even in our own diocese, Good Samaritan Hospital, which was once a non-profit hospital, was taken over by the for-profit health industry.

Then there is our “fallen” economic system; a trickle-down economic system which, during the last 50 years, has turned millionaires into billionaires while turning the working class into the working poor. For the first time in history, billionaires have a lower effective tax rate than working-class Americans. General Mills recently raised its prices on cereals by 20%, blaming inflation. But the truth is, they just paid \$300 million in dividends to investors, bought back \$150 million in stock, paid its CEO \$16 million per year. And to top it off, General Mills makes \$2.1 billion a year in profits. It is greed that is causing much of the inflation we see today.

Even our religious establishments are infected by power and politics as Christian Nationalists transform Jesus from “a humble servant of the poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, and a limited government that neglects the destitute.” Some churchgoers are now viewing the teachings of Jesus Christ (such as the sermon on the Mount) as nothing more than “liberal talking points.”

So, what are we to do to bring hope to this weary, broken world of ours? How can we, people of faith, work towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God? Albert Einstein once said: “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” “We cannot redeem ourselves from a system whose malignancy we scarcely recognize and whose [prizes] we have come to crave... We need revelation to see our sorry state as well as liberation to be freed from it.” (Walter Wink) This revelation is where the gospel of Jesus Christ comes in. The gospel contains the liberating message of Jesus vs. the evils of the Domination System. It speaks of that spirit-killing atmosphere which Jesus condemned and in which we still find ourselves today.

The liberating gospel of Mark (which we will read this year during ordinary time), begins with the baptism of Jesus when he decides to devote his life to the work of God's kingdom. This is the anointed one, who filled with the power of the Holy Spirit became a healer, a prophet who identified with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, and the homeless. This Spirit of God gave him the courage and the wisdom to challenge the destructive powers of the world that included oppression by the Roman Empire, misogyny by the patriarchy, the corruption and hypocrisy of religious officials, the degradation of the poor by the rich, the violence against the weak by the powerful, and a series of laws that dictated legalism over compassion.

And because Jesus stood against, named, and exposed these corrupt powers, they all conspired to snuff him out. The powerful never want to be challenged and they will always fight back! But these powerful forces were unable to silence his words, quench

his spirit, or destroy his followers. Instead, on the third day, the risen Christ broke the chains of death, and the Kingdom of God continued on, despite the odds.

We are gathered here today because of this miracle, being reminded that with God, all things are possible. And so each week, we come together in community to be strengthened in love, knowing that love is the most powerful and only force that can transform this “fallen” world. “We live in a world of outrageous pain. And the only response to outrageous pain is outrageous love.” (Marc Gafni) The message of the gospel, and a life steeped in faith gives us the clarity and courage needed to recognize, expose, and resist those institutions and powers that are life depleting. “The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch and do nothing.” (Einstein) The central question of Christianity is not, “is this progressive or conservative?” The central question of Christianity is this: “Are our institutions and our lives Christlike or not?”

And so we continue to pray: “Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.” (Today’s Collect-BCP 230)