

Series: Words & Deeds Part 1: “They Matter”
“Being Vulnerable But Not Weak In Character”
Exodus 19:2-8a
Psalm 100
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8

The power of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life, lives in everyone. But only those who have responded to God’s love for them in Jesus Christ know it. The Holy Spirit being poured out on all flesh, the Pentecost story, is your story and my story. What are you doing, in word and deed, to bring about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven with vulnerability and strong character?

Before Peter Parker, the super-hero Spider-Man, went public with his newfound superpowers, he had an authentic and vulnerable conversation with his Uncle Ben. Sitting in the car, Uncle Ben admonishes, “These are the years when a man becomes the man he’s going to be for the rest of his life. Just be careful who you change into. You’re feeling this great power, and with great power comes great responsibility.”¹ How Christians use power will either advance the common good, bringing about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven or perpetuate further division politically, interpersonally, spiritually, and religiously. Advancing the common good requires vulnerability and strong character.

¹The source of this citation is preachingtoday.com. *Spider-Man (Columbia Pictures, 2002)*, directed by Sam Raimi; submitted by Derek Chinn.

The power of God within each believer is a creating, redeeming, and sustaining force. Others see, in word and deed, Jesus. The world in which we live is where we too see God. In this regard, Krin Van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller in *Neighborhood Church* write, “If our Christian conviction regarding incarnation teaches us anything, it is this: the world we live in is the place where we encounter God... We encounter God if we are paying attention.”² Humans need a personal and reconciled relationship with God, one another, and others to participate in the creating, redeeming, and sustaining power of God to bring about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The texts in Exodus 19:2-8a, Psalm 100, Romans 5:1-8, and Matthew 9:35-10:8 assert that God seeks humans to be reconciled with God, one another, and others, thus being vulnerable with strong character as participants with God in bringing about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

In Matthew 9:35-10:8, we learn that Jesus has compassion on people, because humans are like sheep, helpless and lost, without a shepherd. God uses “found” humans to love lost humans into being “found.” How is this possible? First, Jesus lived passionately. Jesus’ life was committed to do whatever was necessary for people to understand who he was and the new life they could have. Second, Jesus’ passion was framed in compassion. Jesus hurt for those who didn’t or wouldn’t know him. Jesus’ passion was for healing the brokenness of human experience. Whereas passion means “an enduring inflicted pain,” compassion means, “suffering with” those who inflict the pain. Jesus not only endured and endures inflicted pain, but Jesus endured and endures the pain

²Krin Van Tatenhove & Rob Mueller, *Neighborhood Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 18.

with us. And third, Jesus mandates his followers to live passionate lives. Jesus established himself as the champion for the oppressed, helpless, and lost. God is the harvester of the field. But God has chosen followers of Jesus to participate with God in that harvest.³

Be reminded that the power of God in your life brings about reconciliation, which is the labor of healing the enmities and divisions politically, interpersonally, spiritually, and religiously. We are to be reconcilers. We encounter the unholy realities of poverty, violence, apathy, indifference, racism, and classism that put people at risk and divide us. Again, Krin Van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller, the authors of *Neighborhood Church* write, “Neighborhoods teach us these same lessons. Each of them has particular gifts that provide unique opportunities to encounter the holy tangled up with other, unholy realities.”⁴ The Triune God, is a power for the common good.

Peter Bower was counseled by his Uncle, to be careful who he became as a person through the power he had as the super-hero Spider-Man. In real life, Tony Campolo has taught thousands of people how to be people of deep character and vulnerability as they take on the identity of Jesus Christ. Tony has had a deep impact on my life through his books, listening to him speak, and years of personal encounters and ongoing mentorship.

Tony Campolo wrote a book called *The Kingdom of God is a Party*. He tells the story of a trip to Honolulu in the mid 1980’s. Having crossed far too many time zones from Philadelphia to Hawaii, he found himself awake and needing breakfast at 3:30am

³In the four paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Song-Mi Suzie Park, Mark Ramsey, W. Scott Haldeman, Efrain Agosto, Wyndy Corbin-Reuschling, Sonia E. Waters, and Denise Thorpe in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 68-70, 71-72, 73-75, 76-78, 78-79, 80-83, and 83-84.

⁴Krin Van Tatenhove & Rob Mueller, *Neighborhood Church*, 19.

local time. He ended up in a dive of a place ordering a donut and a coffee. While consuming his donut and coffee, eight or nine prostitutes walked in. The place was small. Then he overheard one of them say, “Tomorrow is my birthday; I’ll be 39.” Somebody teared into her. “So? What do you ya want me to do about it? Want me to throw you a party, bake you a cake, sing “happy birthday?” The first shot back, “Come on! Why do you have to be so mean? I’m just telling you; you don’t have to put me down. I’ve never had a birthday party my whole life.”

What happened next is profound. Tony hung around until they all left, then asked the guy who ran the place if those people came in every night. “They do,” was the response. So Campolo asked if he could throw that one prostitute a big birthday party the next night. Tony and the chef got excited about the idea and made all the arrangements. Campolo decorated the diner, the chef baked a cake, and the word went out on the street. This is how Campolo describes the scene: “By 3:15am every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes... and me!” At 3:30am on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. Tony had everybody ready and when they came in, everyone screamed, “Happy birthday!” Never had Tony seen a person so stunned ... so shaken. Agnes’ mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to one of the stools along the counter, everyone sang “Happy Birthday” to Agnes. As the group came to the end of singing “happy birthday dear Agnes, happy birthday to you,” her eyes moistened. When the cake was carried out with all the candles on it, Agnes lost it and openly cried. “She couldn’t blow out the candles. She couldn’t cut the cake. In fact, she was so overwhelmed that she asked if she could just keep the cake for a little while.” The chef said, “It’s your

cake. Go ahead.” And so, Agnes picked the cake up and carried it home as if it were the most precious thing imaginable.

Immediately, Campolo said; “what do you say we pray?” And he did. Tony prayed for Agnes, for her salvation, for God to turn her life around. At the end, the chef turned to him and said, “You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?” Campolo replied, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30am.”⁵ Like Tony, I cannot ignore the unholy aspects of living as a follower of Jesus Christ. Neither can you. The church in many ways has become too prim and proper. It needs to loosen up and throw parties for people different than ourselves.

On this Third Sunday after Pentecost, we recognize the power of God residing in us. And that power understood correctly advances reconciliation and unity, not division. Wherever justice and unity prevail, through words and deeds of love and compassion, we collaborate with God to bring about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Remember, power will either advance the common good or perpetuate further division politically, interpersonally, spiritually, and religiously. God wants us to participate in God’s mission. It’s funny that way, isn’t it? Jesus was and still is the Lord of the party. Amen.

*This sermon was preached on Trinity Sunday, 18 June 2023
by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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⁵Adapted from Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God is a Party* (Dallas, Texas: WORD Publishing, 1990), 1-9.