

## **“Power and Empower”**

**Rev. Mary Gear**

**Delivered Sunday, February 13, 2022**

**Reading:** An excerpt from the final book written by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King titled *Where Do We Go From Here* published in 1967.

Power properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice.

One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites.

Love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love.

What is needed is the realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.

Power, at its best, is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice, at its best, is power correcting everything that stands against love.

### **Sermon/Homily: Power and Empower**

The story of 6-year-old Ruby Bridges has many meanings; all the best stories do. It is a story that inspires us to do what is right even when it's hard, a story of determination overcoming prejudice, a story of community support and love. It is also a story about power. There are so many ways that power shows up in this story. There is the power of law and other institutions, represented by the Marshals, the federal laws and government, and the rules of the school. There is the power of tradition and culture, “this is how we do things here,” even when how we do things is unfair and unjust. The power of family and community, who supported and loved Ruby. And the power of those

who opposed integration. There's Ruby's powerful sense of right and wrong, her moral compass. There's the power of Ruby's faith in God and faith in the ability of people to change. This is a powerful story in many ways. In this month when we honor Black History, we honor the many stories of the struggle for liberation, those told and untold, those known and unknown.

I'm talking about power today because our spiritual theme for this month is empower, one of the words in the new OUUC mission. For just a bit of context, about this time last year, this congregation crafted new vision and mission statements, and new goals or ends. Our mission is the things that we do to bring about the world we envision. Our goals help define the steps along the way.

Last Spring, you reflected and discussed, and finally adopted a vision of an interconnected world that is loving, just and healthy. You adopted a mission with six words: welcome and wonder, embrace and empower, bridge and become.

I believe we can't understand "empower" without diving into "power" first. Empower simply means to share or give our power to help someone else. It might help them be more strong or confident, to use their voice, to act for themselves or to act on behalf of others. If we are to empower, we first need to understand our power.

Dr. King described power as the ability to achieve purpose, the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic changes. Six-year-old Ruby had power, so did the marshals and so did her school and community. The reality is that most of us have some power, and some of us have a lot.

One of the ways for us to understand power is in the context of privilege. This perspective is especially important for justice work. The slide that is going up is the Wheel of Power and Privilege, created by Sylvia Duckworth. We'll also put a link to this in the chat.

**[https://www.thisshowyoucan.com/post/wheel\\_of\\_power\\_and\\_privilege](https://www.thisshowyoucan.com/post/wheel_of_power_and_privilege)**

Each spoke of the wheel is an area of identity or a human characteristic, like gender,

skin color, body size, mental and physical health, wealth, education, housing. At the center is power. The closer to the center of the wheel you are on the spokes, the more privilege you have and so the more power you have. If you are on the outer edge of the wheel, you are on the margins and have less power.

Where are you on some of these spokes? Toward the center? On the margin?

As you place yourself on the wheel, just take a moment to notice, how are you feeling in your body right now? What is your body telling you about your power?

Power in this context is an uncomfortable word for some of us, perhaps even most of us. We might feel like we have no or little power. We might feel ashamed of our power, especially when it is paired with our privileges. We might have been or be in positions of power unsure of how to use it or afraid of using it. We might have been or be in positions under those with power and feeling oppressed and powerless.

When I first learned about this wheel and placed myself on the spokes, I felt a lot of things: stunned, defensive, a bit ashamed, grieving the injustice. I tried to imagine the person who would be on the margins in every spoke. In Olympia, I think I've seen that person living in a homeless encampment. They have little power, if any. But it wasn't hard to imagine the person at the center of every spoke; we see them in the media every single day. They most certainly have power.

I believe many of us are uncomfortable with power because we have experienced "power over." Most of our social structure is hierarchical, and there are people at the top with more power. "Power over" means those at the top use their power to enrich the minority at the expense of the majority, oppression of most people so there is more of everything for a few at the top. Dr King said, "power without love is reckless and abusive." "Power over" is a challenge to the human spirit, so we tend to respond by rising up, resisting and rebelling, or giving in.

Think about the political battles over COVID restrictions right now. Masks have been framed as a power issue, with some believing it is a minority of elites oppressing the majority with restrictions on freedom. COVID restrictions didn't have to be framed this

way and some leaders aren't doing so. They are framing COVID precautions as our responsibility to each other as we face a collective public health crisis. The people who deliver the message that COVID restrictions take away our freedoms are flexing their power, using "power over" to control and manipulate others and the media, grasping for power they believe they've unfairly lost or are afraid of losing.

Within a hierarchy it is possible to use power in other ways. Because we humans are different in so many ways, you can honestly say that we are inherently unequal. We can find ways to create equal voice and participation, even when there is unequal status. That's equity. It's what democracy as an ideal seeks to do.

A global interdisciplinary network of activists, organizers, educators & scholars named Just Associates says that there are three other ways that we can share power in a hierarchy: instead of "power over," we can use "power with, power to, and power within."

"Power with" means finding common ground among different interests to build collective strength, mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration. This sounds like the Unitarian Universalist 7<sup>th</sup> principle to me—we are all connected.

"Power to" recognizes that everyone has the power to make a difference. We can develop and grow, lending our power to make change.

"Power within" means that we develop a strong foundation of self-worth and self-knowledge so that we can recognize and respect differences without feeling threatened, so we can join together to make change. I'd call this power within the spark of divinity in each of us and the moral compass we develop in a faith community.

Each of these kinds of power is empowerment, how we can share power in meaningful and just ways.

Sometimes we give up our power. Author and activist Alice Walker said, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." I have power, as do each of you. Where did you find power on the wheel? I am white, heterosexual, educated, housed, middle-class, a native English speaker. On some other

spokes I am not as privileged or powerful. I also have power related to my position here, and I carry the power of the clergy. Power that has been used for great good and great evil.

When I was in seminary at Starr King School for the Ministry, I experienced power and privilege in a new way. The faculty and staff at Starr King are intentional about upending the power and privilege wheel. Grounded in Unitarian Universalist values, the school's mission is to train people for religious leadership to counter oppressions, cultivate multi-religious life and learning, and create just and sustainable communities. My experience there was of learning in an environment where those on the margins were intentionally centered, asking those often in the center to share and step aside. As someone used to being pretty close to the center most of the time, being more on the margins was often an uncomfortable experience for me. The language and norms were not what I was used to; sometimes I felt like I was in a foreign land without the privileges I was used to. I learned a lot; not just how to be a minister, but I hope how to be a better human.

Did I still have power and privilege at Starr King? Sure I did. And, so did others. It felt different because it was counter-cultural. As we seek to remedy decades of silencing those on the margins, this is the same dynamic we're experiencing in Unitarian Universalism—those of us usually in the center need to step back and make room, sharing our power. It is also the same dynamic we're experiencing as a nation—as our population becomes more multicultural, those of us used to the center will need to share power. It might be uncomfortable in the way that something new is uncomfortable, and it might be uncomfortable because it feels like a loss, especially if we believe there isn't enough for everyone. It says a lot about our culture that we don't believe there is enough room in the center for everyone. It says a lot about our UU faith that we continue to demand that there is.

Power in itself is not dangerous, but how we use it might be. To empower is one of the ways we can use our power for good.

Power never exists in a vacuum; it is always in relationship with others. Those of us who

have power can lend our power to others, share our power, or use our power to create space for others to be heard. For example, many of you who are housed have a long history of using your power to help those in Olympia who are unhoused. Some of you are involved in offering and building and supporting shelter. There is a long history of feeding people who aren't housed and would not be able to buy or prepare food. You lend your power, so others have the possibility to feel more confident and stronger. More human.

We share our power when we show up to bear witness and stand with others against injustice. We share power when we show up as allies in the fight for racial justice. Sharing power can mean stepping back to make space for others to be leaders and making space for all voices to be heard, especially voices from the margins.

I'd say that "power over" is our cultural norm. We see it in government, in our workplaces and in our communities. It's how many of us were trained as leaders. For those of us who experience "power over" on the underside, when we get power we tend to resort to "power over" others because that's what we know. It is counter cultural to share power, and for that we need each other. We need the support of a community to learn how to share power, to practice it, to hold each other accountable, and to support each other as we learn and grow.

In order to empower, we have to embrace love, the universal love of our first UU principle that honors the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Universal love is amazing and it's not enough. Dr. King said, "love without power is sentimental and anemic."

To live into our mission to empower, we must also acknowledge and embrace our power. Dr. King knew this when he said, "Power, at its best, is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice, at its best, is power correcting everything that stands against love." That is the power of love.

This month and always, may we have the courage to embrace our power and use it with love, all in the pursuit of justice.