

Empire and the Powers

The following is a sermon I offered at Friends of Jesus Church (one of the faith communities of Church of the Saviour in Washington) in May of 2005. I had been increasingly concerned about what was coming as the American Empire began running up against itself and its contradictions. In this sermon I explore three of the Powers: Democracy, Capitalism, and Corporations. It seems to me that communities of faith have a special responsibility in this time. Friends of Jesus Sermon

To begin I must confess that this sermon comes at a time of personal spiritual crisis. Two and a half years ago, I left my work at Joseph's House because of a smoldering call to political resistance to American Empire. During that 2½-year period I've spent a lot of time in quiet, I've shared my evolving understanding of our spiritual/political situation with you and others, I've tried to write and teach, I've spent some time in Iraq, I've committed myself deeply to the Eighth Day community and to our life together.

But I have not found that clear call, and it certainly hasn't found me.

Recently I've returned to half-time work at Joseph's House, in part because of the needs there that I could help with but perhaps even more because I felt so rootless out here, writing, speaking, and teaching but having nowhere to put my feet down. The work at Joseph's House is good. It's given me roots. But I'm still restless. The situation in our part of the world is desperate; I sense a vocation to be involved in the healing; but I haven't known what to do.

I suspect I'm not alone in feeling this despair, and I think I'm beginning to understand why some of us feel it. Two years ago here, I talked with you about Walter Wink's understanding of the Powers and Principalities. The reality is that we're now struggling against things that are far greater than a few ideological human beings in positions of authority. We're struggling against Powers that have become virtually independent of the people who compose them, and the closer we get to the struggle, the more we realize the immensity of the Powers arrayed against us.

Because my sermons tend to get depressing in the middle, let me tell you what I'd like to do, so you know what's coming. I'm going to talk with you about three specific Powers,

“democracy,” corporations, and capitalism and try to tease out some parts of what they’ve become. In the process, I think we’ll see why it’s easy to despair of our situation.

Then I’d like to describe to you briefly the response of three Eastern European countries—Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland—to the overwhelming Power that was the Soviet Union. And finally I’d like to suggest that our current despair forces us more deeply into our faith, onto one another, and into our communities where we must begin to think differently about our responses to these Powers confronting us.

A year ago April, as the presidential election was heating up, the *Washington Post* published a remarkable poll showing that absolute majorities of Americans believed:

- that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction just before the start of war. Fully 2/3 of people thought that either most experts also believed that Iraq had these weapons or that experts were evenly divided on the matter;
- that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda before the war (including almost half who believed that *concrete evidence* for this had been found and 1/5 who believed that Iraq was directly involved in the 9/11 attacks); and
- that other nations around the world generally supported the United States’ position in Iraq.

Now, each of these beliefs was demonstrably false—as even the Bush Administration acknowledged when pressed—yet over half of the polled Americans believed just the opposite.

I know that this is only one small example, but think for a minute about its implications for our democracy. Over the last century, advertising has become a sophisticated and extraordinarily powerful tool. Highly educated specialists now use these highly refined tools that can persuade people of almost anything. This power of advertising has now been applied to the political process. Even in matters of extreme political importance, *facts* stand little chance against the powerful who have access to unlimited media budgets. It’s not only the Bush administration, of course, but effective utilization of these techniques

is
limited to those who can afford the vast sums necessary to saturate the media. The powerful can quite effectively control what people believe ... and therefore how they vote. What’s the meaning of
democracy

under those circumstances?

Imagine an isolated mining community in which 95% of the adults are laborers in the mines. They work extraordinary hours for wages that barely support them and their families. They simply have no income or time that they can spare to political activism. The other 5% are wealthy executives and managers. Now imagine an issue facing the legislature that every laborer would support because it would guarantee significantly increased wages. Before that issue faces a vote, however, there's an election for all the legislators. But the costs of a political campaign are significant and must be borne privately. Even to let your constituents identify you and know your position costs money that the laborers don't have.

In such a situation, even though 95% of their constituents would want them to vote for it, no political party could afford to run on that platform. The clear will of the people would be thwarted. That mining community is a simple abstraction, of course, but I'd like to suggest that we're not far from it in the US. What's the meaning of democracy under those circumstances?

I believe that the implications for our democracy are devastating. I'd like to suggest, in fact, that while we're still *technically* a democracy, for practical purposes we no longer are. The United States is now an oligarchy, a state in which a relatively small number of people control the government. (Read, for instance, today's Washington *Post* for a truly disturbing article about the changes in our government that have placed a small oligarchy of radical conservatives in control of the entire ship of state.)

That's the condition of our "democracy." Now let's think for a minute about large, publicly owned corporations. Because of the development of our laws over the last two centuries, corporations occupy a unique and, I want to say, extraordinarily dangerous position in our society. Legally, corporations are "persons." That means that they have all the rights and protections of persons: free speech, anti-discrimination laws, the whole bill of rights. Even misleading advertising is protected as "free speech." Their legal structure, however, protects any of the owners and managers from personal responsibility for what the corporation does (unless they've personally broken the law).

So, let's say a company earns billions of dollars for its shareholders over the space of thirty years, after which time it's discovered that one of the effluents from the company is a powerful carcinogen that has rendered thousands of acres unsuitable for habitation, let's say an entire small city. The company is sued, and—because it can afford only a tiny percentage of the costs

of the cleanup—it goes bankrupt. It's gone, so it can't be sued any more. And the billions of dollars that the shareholders earned through that very pollution are completely safe from legal action. The cost of the cleanup has to be carried by the community. The shareholders just walk away.

Most of us probably haven't heard of an "externality," but it's an important economic concept. An externality occurs when the company doesn't have to pay the costs of resources it uses or pay the costs of negative consequences of its production. So, for instance, roads, an educated work force, and clean air are resources that the company can use for free. Pollution, resource depletion or even low-paid Wal-Mart workers that have to go to the government for food stamps are all externalities. The company makes its very private profits by using public resources. It leaves the consequences to all of us. They get rich and we're left with the bill.

Legally, the corporation's only responsibility is to its shareholders. Especially if the shareholders are large groups of people (like insurance companies, unions, or pension plans), that responsibility is for practical purposes *only* to the bottom line. Profit to the shareholders is its only purpose, and even sensitive, progressive managers who care about the environment must make decisions that benefit the stockholders—regardless of the ultimate cost to the rest of the world.

What all this means is that corporations are specifically designed to extract and use non-renewable resources from the world and return negative externalities for the rest of us to pay for. That's their responsibility. As the earth moves toward environmental disaster, corporations are not structurally capable of changing course ... unless they are forced to.

Finally, let's consider capitalism ... very briefly. I won't go into detail here, but for reasons similar to what I just outlined for the corporation, unconstrained capitalism is simply incapable of protecting the "commons," the non-privately-owned rest of the world that we all live in. As with the corporations, capitalism will use resources until they're gone; it'll pollute its own nest as long as it's allowed to; it will pay its workers less than they need to live on if it can. Like other Powers, of course, capitalism is a powerful tool for good when brought under proper control. It's highly efficient at producing and distributing things and raising the standard of living. But it simply cannot bring about justice or protect the environment unless it's forced to. Unconstrained, it leads inevitably to increasing inequality and environmental devastation.

I'd like to suggest that each of the three Powers—"democracy," corporations, capitalism—has

become a grotesque caricature of its God-given purpose. As happens so frequently, these Powers have taken on lives of their own, rebelled, and become extraordinarily powerful. From a strictly human, political point of view, they're in charge now, and no one can successfully challenge them. Corporations and capitalism must be restrained by laws and government if they're to act for the benefit of the creation, but we no longer have a democracy that can restrain them.

So, it's no wonder that many of us have felt so much despair and have had so little idea of what to do.

Thirty-five years ago, the people of Eastern Europe were in a similar situation. They were dominated by the Soviet Union, which had demonstrated its willingness to use any force necessary to maintain its "sphere of influence." In the 1950s, when each of these countries rebelled, Soviet troops had moved in violent response. It had become obvious that direct confrontation with the Soviet Union was useless: they had all the guns. Working separately from one another, however, leaders in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland recognized the overwhelming military superiority of the Soviet Union and began encouraging the development of what they would call "parallel structures." Adam Michnik in Poland wrote that revolution was unrealistic. George Konrad in Hungary wrote that those who have the bombs have the power. Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia suggested that "Defending the aims of life, defending humanity, is a more realistic approach." Havel wrote that each person has the choice of whether to "live in the truth" or in the lie. Living in truth, he said, is "doing what you think needs to be done, saying what you think is true and needs saying, and acting the way you think people should act."

These leaders lowered their sights and aimed not at overthrowing the system but at achieving changes in daily life. We often think of the Soviet Union collapsing from the top down, but that's only part of the story. It also collapsed from the bottom up as, for instance, the union Solidarity withdrew its support and went about developing its parallel structures that didn't so much *challenge* the state as replaced it. And when the state did collapse of its own weight, the parallel structures that had been developed were right there to offer their countries effective leadership.

We're in a similar situation in this country. I hesitate to say this, but I no longer believe that we're going to fix this democracy, or this economic system, or the structure of the corporations. It's gone too far. Like the countries in Eastern Europe, like the Christians during the Roman Empire, we face temporal powers that are too strong for us. And there's no magic pendulum that will swing us automatically back into democracy.

So what do we do? Neville Watson, the Australian lawyer and pastor whom many of you know, has written the following:

We challenge the lies. We live in truth. We become the change we want to see. We offer an alternative. We lower our sights, and in living the change we wish to see in our society, we institute a fundamental break with dominant values and the conformist patterns of the system. ... It is not about being successful. It is about being faithful.

In South Africa, prior to the abolition of apartheid, [writes Neville] people used to light a candle and place it in their windows as a sign of hope. At one point, this was declared illegal and the children used to say “Our government is scared of candles”.

What would it mean for us to light candles in this sick culture of ours?

It's becoming clear that this system is accelerating toward crisis. It's not yet clear—at least to me—what the nature of that crisis will be, but there are any number of possibilities:

- the collapse of the economic system under the weight of our extraordinary debt,
- an autocratic government along with an accelerating loss of civil liberties,
- a major terrorist attack
- an ecological catastrophe. (Actually, it's easy to predict a certain and severe ecological crisis; it's harder to know whether that will be soon or in a matter of decades.)

While it's always rash to be specific, it seems to me extremely likely that the first of the major crises will come within the next fifteen years.

I think what we Christians want to be about is preparing ourselves and others for that crisis. Can we learn the truth about our current situation and speak it widely? (Read, for instance, today's *Washington Post* for an article reporting that the respected Amnesty International has declared that the United States is now “a leading purveyor and practitioner” of torture. It named the US detention center at Guantánamo “the gulag of our time.”) Can we be ready to explain to

others that what's being done now will lead to crisis? And when that crisis comes, can we be ready to explain its nature and causes to others, so that the country can respond more intelligently? Can we develop the alternative structures ready to step in when the dominant structures collapse? Can we develop communities that know enough about living in the truth to guide others in the way?

Can we, as Havel suggested, "live in the truth," doing what we think needs to be done, saying what we think is true and needs saying, and acting the way we think people should act?

Seventy-five years ago, the country entered such a crisis as is now coming. While it occasioned much suffering, the Great Depression was also the opportunity for great change. The programs of the New Deal would have been unimaginable ten years earlier. This coming crisis will also be an opportunity. While there's no guarantee that we'll negotiate it successfully, the opportunity will be there.

The story is actually an old one:

And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an *indispensable* weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.

- Ephesians 6:10-18 (The Message)

Let it be so.