

The Version of Power Nobody Taught You

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] So this morning, with so many things going badly in our world, I want to begin with the story of something going right.

A story that actually ends well. It's about a Tuesday morning in Decatur, Georgia, August 20th, 2013.

Antoinette Tuft, a bookkeeper, was sitting in the front office of the school where she worked, just doing her job managing the rhythm of an ordinary school day.

When a 20-year-old man walked through the doors carrying an AK-47 and 500 rounds of ammunition, 800 students were in the building, 100 staff, and the only thing preventing them from becoming the newest statistics in America's gun violence epidemic was a woman.

A woman with no badge, with no weapon, with no tactical training. Just a woman. In touch with herself, in touch with her God, and in touch with her power.

[1 : 20] Instead of going into fight or flight or attempting a demeanor of control and command, Antoinette Tuft did what women have been doing for millennia.

She chose to tend and befriend. She simply talked to the young man. She simply listened to the young man. She told him about her own pain.

Don't feel bad, baby, she said. My husband just left me after 33 years. She told him that she was in the process of losing her car and about the challenges of caring for her multiply disabled son.

She spoke to him not as a threat to be neutralized, but as a person to be loved. She said, We're continuing our sermon series entitled Everything We Carry.

We're talking about, as Daniel put it so perfectly last week, what it looks like when we've encountered the desolation of the Fridays of our lives, made it to Saturday, and we're surviving our Saturdays of disorientation and deconstruction, and then we've made it to Sunday, when we can feel the resurrection tingling as our hearts move from stone to flesh.

[3 : 09] After all that, what do we do on Monday? How can we take stock of everything we're carrying and steward it well?

What are the commitments that ground us as we walk forward faithfully as disciples of the risen Jesus? Today we're going to talk about power, what it's for, and how we carry it well.

See, I'm not sure what you talked about in your groups, but for many of us, when we think about the word power, we don't think of Antoinette Tuft.

We think of something that is harder and colder, more strategic, more forceful. The Western imagination has a particular grammar of power.

For example, Sun Jiu, the ancient author of one of the most influential books in the West on leadership, The Art of War, tells us that to maintain order, a leader must be prepared to wage war.

[4 : 14] Another extremely popular book, Robert Greene's The 48 Laws of Power, includes laws on keeping and getting and keeping power. A couple of those laws.

Law number two, never put too much trust in friends, learn how to use enemies. Law number three, conceal your intentions, keep your true purpose hidden to prevent others from preparing defenses. Law number seven, get others to do the work for you, but always take the credit. Some of y'all have bosses that are really good at law number seven. And then law number 20, do not commit to anyone.

That is the grammar of the power that we have inherited. So deeply embedded in our consciousness that when we hear that word, we just often feel guilt or maybe suspicion.

We're not sure that we want it. We know what it's done. And so we either chase it by the world's rules or we give up on it entirely.

[5 : 27] But I want to suggest that the way that God defines power is different.

I think author Elizabeth Lesser puts this well when she provides another framework on power. Power, she says, it's been so abused that it feels like a dirty word. But what is it exactly? Power is a natural force. And it's something we all want. The energy, the freedom, the authority to be who we are, to contribute, to create. Domination and control have become synonymous with power. But power does not have to come at the expense of others. All of us want to shine as brightly as we can. It's as if we come into this world bearing a spark, one that longs to be fanned into the flame of authentic selfhood. There is nothing inherently domineering about that pure desire to shine. [6 : 32] Nothing in it that must suck up all the oxygen and extinguish the other flames. There is a way to reveal one's shining self. Self. Without diminishing the light of another.

There is a way to do power differently than the way we have come to define it. So, on this Mother's Day, I want us to explore that different way of holding power. A way that the Antoinette Tufts of the world have always known. And to do that, we're going to go to Acts. And specifically, the very beginning of that book, Acts 1, 3-9. After his suffering, this is Jesus. After his suffering, Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs.

Appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. This, he said, is what you have heard from me.

[7 : 43] For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?

He replied, God, it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. We meet in this passage the disciples at the end of the 40 days after Jesus had risen from the dead.

And if you know your Bible symbolism, you know that 40 is never an accident. 40 days of rain in the days of Noah to drown out the old world and give birth to the new.

40 days in the wilderness before a people could know themselves outside of the definition of Pharaoh's empire. 40 days spent fasting before Jesus began his ministry.

[8 : 57] 40 is always this threshold, always the waiting room between what was and what will be. And in this threshold, the disciples ask a question.

It's the only direct question recorded in this passage and it reveals something about their assumptions. Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? In other words, is it time for us to have the power that we imagined?

Military power, political power, economic power, the kind of power that defeats empires and restores national glory.

The disciples had seen the resurrection. They had touched the body of Jesus. and still, like so many of us, they are asking for the old kind of power.

But Jesus sidesteps their question. Instead of answering, he says, basically, that's not yours to know. Then he gives the most revolutionary instruction that contains the most radical prospect.

[10 : 13] Wait for the spirit. the spirit will give you power. Now, I gotta pause here because I think that many of us have a complicated relationship with the Holy Spirit.

We can maybe picture God as loving parent or creator. We can picture Jesus, flesh, bone, carpenter's hands, but the spirit, the Holy Ghost, what some have called the spook of the Trinity, is so much harder for us to wrap our minds around.

And honestly, that does make sense. The spirit is disembodied and understood as being everywhere. The spirit has an air of unknowability that can't be rationalized or easily categorized. The spirit forces us to grapple with mystery. But the spirit also defies our understanding of power. See, the spirit is associated with emotion and deep feeling with the terrain of our inner world. The spirit is the one who always points away from herself. And perhaps not coincidentally, the spirit in scripture is most often associated with the grammatical feminine.

[11 : 40] in many ways, the spirit is the person of the Trinity who looks most like what the world calls weakness.

And yet, Jesus says, she is the one who will give you power. Let's look again at the scriptures to see what that power might be intended for.

when the day of Pentecost had come. I love this passage. They were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues as a fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem and at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

[12 : 53] Amazed and astonished they asked are not all these who are speaking Galileans and how is it that we hear each of us in our own native language?

Y'all there is so much that has been said of this passage so much that has been made of this passage but today I just want you to notice one thing after the uncontrollable rush of wind after the uncontrollable appearance of fires the disciples begin to speak and they begin to speak in languages that they could not possibly have known a crowd begins to gather Jews from every corner of the world and each one hears in their own native language I think this is part of the reason that I love this passage I'm a person who's always wanted to be fluent in another language and while I have not mastered any of the ones I've studied Spanish French Arabic Hebrew I will not give up my son and my daughter who are in Spanish immersion schools they regularly re-pronounce words I've said in Spanish even my three-year-old she will say it in the slowest possible way back to me this happens all the time with a clear look in her eyes that says mama this this is not your ministry but regardless of that clear insubordination

I I will not stop trying to learn y'all maybe it's bad okay I won't stop trying to learn because to know a language different from your own native tongue is to open up another world it is to expand the space of profound connection theologian Willie James Jennings puts it like this to speak a language is to speak a people language is not just communication it is intimacy it is the password to the interior life of a culture see disciples are given power they are given power for connection power for intimacy and notice what the crowd says when they hear them are not these who are speaking Galileans the disciples speak in the languages of others with their own accents intact they are still themselves this is an intimacy that defies assimilation just as much as it is an intimacy that defies appropriation it's about speaking it's about joining it's about it's not about acquiring another person or another culture as a trophy it's about becoming close becoming known and knowing the kind of power the spirit gives and desires us to exercise is about radical connection and then what happens next the crowd is like y'all are really drunk yeah and

Peter gets up and explains and when he does he doesn't invent a new theology of Pentecost he reaches back and said into the Hebrew Bible into the prophet Joel and says this is what Joel was talking about this is where we've always been headed in the last days it will be God declares that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh and then he he talks about how there will be these portents in heaven above and signs on the earth below notice Scott McKnight says how Peter understood Pentecost he claimed that this act of God fulfilled Joel and what did that text say clearly it spoke of God sending of the spirit to democratize the people of God as an act of apocalyptic judgment on unjust rulers notice he says how this quotation by Peter puts together two central themes the spirit for all and judgment on injustice now the spirit's creation of the church the spirit being poured out on all flesh represents a loud and clear democratization of the divine presence it is apocalypse not as the end of the world apocalypse as the unveiling of what has always been true it's the exposure of injustice to the light the new community born at

Pentecost is from its first breath a critique of the way power works in the world it exists to embody an alternative! for some of us I can guess that this might be a new way of talking about the Holy Spirit the baptism of the Holy Spirit for some of us the giving of the spirit at Pentecost may have been explained as something that's basically individual not communal we might have only been exposed to those ideas in ways that were performative and if you have been in churches like mine the ones I grew up in that were Baptocostal when there was talk of the baptism of the Holy Spirit

then the language of revival was not far behind if you shook a little inside I'm sorry when I said that revival y'all but y'all lately I've been feeling this need to reclaim the word revival after all the civil rights movement was first of all a religious revival and

[18 : 55] I do want to see that kind of revival not revival in the key of the first great awakening during which its most prominent preacher George Whitfield wrote to a friend that the Christianity of black converts would not make them more slaves no I want to see revival in the mode of the 1906 Azusa street revival in Los Angeles the revival to which most scholars trace the beginnings of Pentecostalism see the church at the center of Azusa was profoundly shaped by black female domestic workers it was led by janitors and washer women people whose religious imagination had been shaped by the crucible of American slavery and in the early days of that church they held power in profoundly different ways its life together was a critique of patterns of domination and consumer desire embedded in

American racial capitalism womanist theologian Carrie! Day says this black women domestics and their leadership of Azusa's religious practices created the very conditions of radical relationality at Azusa making possible practices of connection care joy and intimacy within this religious community that was Pentecost again radical relationality power to speak power for intimacy power for redistribution!

in two weeks Christians around the world are going to celebrate Pentecost and in our own country where the voting rights act was just gutted and where we are at war with Iran even though for the life of me I can't exactly understand why except I guess I can exactly understand why we have to keep this question at the front of our minds what does God intend us to use power for and I think the text gives us three answers and then I'm going to sit down each of these answers embodies a commitment first is a commitment to speak the power of Pentecost begins with a voice it begins with witness it begins with a willingness to tell the story and your stories the disciples open their mouths and tell the story the story of resurrection the story of a

God who refuses to let death have the final word they are given power to be witnesses and so are you I sometimes sense that in our church the closet that holds most of us captive has nothing to do with gender or sexuality I think the closet that challenges most of us is the one that keeps us from telling the stories of our relationship with Jesus the downs but also the ups it is the one that keeps us from asking the people right beside us how is your soul not just what has your therapist been saying but also what has God been saying we are stewarding power well we use our voices to witness to mystery not just ideas second the commitment to intimacy when the spirit of God's power came the disciples weren't given power over the crowd they were given power toward the crowd to draw close to enter in to be known and to know and I think to steward power well we always have to be choosing messiness over mastery connection over control and for many of us that means at its most basic level refusing to stay at the edges of the church it might mean sitting down and deciding like in four months of Sundays I'm going to commit to be there three times two times I don't know but to do it intentionally it might mean saying I'm not going to stay at the edge of the community I'm going to once a month go out to lunch with people but it means getting involved with the intimate it means loving the people around us and then finally the commitment to redistribution

[23 : 54] Acts two doesn't end with Peter's sermon it ends with the community that redistributes resources it ends with the people who hold things in common who sell what they have so that no one is in need and then later in act six when the Greek speaking widows are being overlooked in the distribution of food the community doesn't just expand its charity power to the very Greek speaking folks who are being marginalized to steward power well is always to open our hands to give away resources to loosen our grasp y'all when I think about Antoinette Tuff I remember that she disarmed a gunman with 500 rounds of ammunition by simply being willing to be present to another human being fully she had the willingness to speak she had an inclination toward intimacy she loosened her grasp enough to love somebody the world had already written off and 800 children went home safely to their families that evening that is the power

Pentecost is talking about the power that we are called to steward and here is the good news the word that I want you we were made to carry this power not the 48 laws not the art of war but the power that leads us into revolutionary encounter with others with ourselves and with our God so y'all my prayer is that the wind would blow in this place that the fire would fall that we would open our mouths and tell our stories of our lives with Jesus that we would draw close to others and let go

of our tendency to hoard that we would make room because Pentecost is not a holiday it's not just a holiday that we celebrate it's a life we're called to live in the same spirit that showed up in an upper room 2000 years ago the same spirit that showed up on Azusa Street in 1906 the same spirit that showed up in a school office in

Decai Georgia in 2013 is here she's here and she is still handing out power the only question is will we receive it amen