

## Abuse of Power

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One of the criticisms of UU sermons in general, and of UU sermons from lay people in particular, is that we don't preach from a "text." By text, of course, they mean a biblical passage. Of course, there are reasons we often don't use a biblical passage as the jumping off point for sermons. You know, things like the bible is an interesting collection of 2000 year old stories that take place in a land of farmers and shepherds that's halfway around the world.

But today I'm going to step outside of the box and actually use a passage from the New Testament as my jumping off point. You can decide later whether you want to jump off with me ... or just stay behind and watch my arms flail as I try to keep from crashing to the ground.

We begin in the book of Matthew, chapter 21, verses 17-22. [read text]

The same story is told, with a few little differences, in the book of Mark. One of the little twists is that Mark's version says that figs were out of season, so of course the tree didn't have any fruit.

Now I'm willing to bet that there aren't too many sermons that have been given about this story. Frankly, you have to wonder why this story is included in the gospels. It sure doesn't put Jesus in a good light, it doesn't seem to be consistent with his message of peace, tolerance, and love. When Stephen Mitchell put together his fascinating work, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, he didn't include this story. Same thing with Thomas Jefferson – his *Jefferson Bible* does not include this story.

But my guess is that this story is here because it was a story that people had heard. Remember, the gospels weren't written down until 50 or 100 years after Jesus died. So an oral history had developed – people telling Jesus stories. And my guess is that this story was told a lot, so the gospels just wouldn't be credible if this story were left out. Today, I guess, we'd say the story had "legs."

Of course, we don't know what really happened with that fig tree, or if it happened at all. Astronomers can explain the star that rose on the day of Jesus's birth. Maybe agronomists can explain the sudden death of a fig tree – the desert equivalent of Dutch elm disease, or something. It really doesn't matter to me. What matters is that the story is included in the gospels and has the ring of truth – because it's so out of character.

And don't think I'm just picking on Jesus. Let me share with you one more biblical passage, this one from the Old Testament – you're really getting your money's worth this morning. (Hey, you want text, I'll give you text!) This one is from the book of Numbers chapter 20, verses 1-13, which takes place during the 40 years that the Jews spent in the desert after they fled Egypt. [read text]

It's pretty much the same story, or at least the same message, isn't it? It's the story of the abuse of power. And no one – not even the greatest men who have ever lived – is immune from it. Two men who have literally risen to, dare I say it, biblical proportion – Moses, the great leader, and Jesus, the great teacher and peace maker – both succumbed to the abuse of their power.

Perhaps these stories tell us that the abuse of power is an inherent part of human nature; a flaw that we cannot avoid and, therefore, one that we must be ever vigilant to guard against in ourselves and our leaders. If we bestow power on someone, we must assume that they will – some day – attempt to abuse that power.

For Moses and his brother Aaron, the punishment for abuse of power was swift and severe. They were denied entry into the promised land. And at the end of Deuteronomy – the end of the 40 year desert journey – God kept his word. Aaron had already died and God told Moses to climb a mountain, so Moses could look out over the promised land, and Moses died on top of that mountain.

For Jesus, we're not told of any repercussions. Yet, if someone asks me was Jesus a man or a god – and why would anyone ask a UU that question? – I would point to his slaying of that innocent fig tree, his abuse of power, as proof that Jesus was a flawed, mortal human being, just like the rest of us. He couldn't handle his power any better than Moses or any other human being.

The abuse of power by leaders. What a painfully relevant theme for today. Leaders who ignore the will of the people, leaders who erode our hard-fought liberties, leaders who take our undeniable power and use it to threaten and cajole and kill those who disagree with them.

Do I blame a person for wanting to abuse his or her power? No, how could I, when even the greatest people in history have done so.

But I blame others for not reigning in that potential for abuse. In this country, our government was created with an as-then unheard of system of checks on executive power. This isn't just the "checks and balances" we learned about in school; the three co-equal branches of government that are often anything but. No, what makes our system of government different – at least in theory – is that ultimate power is vested in the people.

Listen to what Thomas Jefferson teaches us. He wrote:

- "[It is] the people, to whom all authority belongs."
- "The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to."
- "[Leaders] cannot in any country be uninfluenced by the voice of the people."
- And, finally, "Public opinion [is the] lord of the universe."

When our leaders attempt to abuse their power, we expect their advisors to say no. When they refuse, we expect our legislators and judges to say no. When they, too, fail us, then the ultimate source of power – the people – must say no.

I am frustrated, angry, upset – you choose the word - with our country's leaders. To me, it's not a question of peace vs. war. Who in their right mind would ever favor war over peace? But deep down, I also recognize that there are times when war is the only option. I keep asking myself: how would I feel about the current debate if it were 1937 and the sadistic dictator developing weapons of mass destruction was Adolf Hitler? Would I still be opposed to a preemptive strike?

It's not a question of right vs. wrong – of course we think we're right to take a stand against terrorism, dictators who torture and murder their own people, and horrific chemical and biological weapons. It's not a question of whether Saddam Hussein is good for the downtrodden people of his country. Of course he isn't, though I have yet to hear of an alternative that would be better. And, yes, of course he's a threat to the world, though it seems that he is a threat that has been pretty well contained for the past few decades.

Can reasonable people differ on what to do about these problems? Sure, they can. And I sure would like to hear a full-fledged debate in our Congress about the relative strengths and weaknesses of various options for dealing with Iraq.

And that's what frustrates me so. At its root, I believe, the question our country faces is about whether we will abuse our undeniable economic and military power. Will we use our power to lead by example, or will we use it to threaten, blackmail, invade and murder? And I hear precious few leaders in our government standing up for what I have always been taught were the American ideals of freedom, self-determination, democracy, and the rule of law.

More than 2000 years ago, we are told that Zerubbabel set out to rebuild the holy Jewish temple in Jerusalem. He did not know how he was going to do it, how he would keep his workers from being slaughtered, how he would find the resources and the stamina for the daunting task, or how he would keep it from being destroyed yet again. And we are told that God spoke to Zerubbabel and told him that the project would succeed “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit.” [Zechariah 4:6]

We can accomplish our goals not with might – not by abusing our power – but by bringing the spirit of peace and justice to the world.

We also must remember that we, the people, hold the ultimate power. And we too must not abuse that power. It is one thing to disagree with our leaders, publicly chastise them, or even remove them from office. It is quite another to abuse that power by abandoning the hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters who are assembled in the Middle East to do the will of our government.

In the most trying times this country ever faced, Abraham Lincoln cautioned us: “Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?”

And I would add, let us pray for the wisdom, for ourselves and our leaders, to understand the limits on the use of the incredible power that we have been given. Amen.