

A Power for Good
Annual Meeting Sunday - 2/5/17
1 Corinthians 13

A few weeks ago, as you know, I was on the other side of the world -- not just me, but ten of us from this church, ten of us who went off to India to spend ten days immersed in the lives of the poorest of the poor, bearing witness to the good work being done in your name, with your support. Next month, all of us who went will be up here sharing stories, telling you about our "*God moments*" on the trip. There are plenty to share. So let me tell you about just one of them now.

First you need to know that in India, it's a tradition on New Year's Day for everyone to wear new clothes.

The women, who to us are dazzling **every** day, on New Year's Day are even more so, dressed in bright new colorful saris; girls dance around in their new outfits with the same joy that many of us can remember putting on our Christmas dresses.

Everyone wears something new -- except, of course, among the poor.

The children of the slums, the ones we care for, wear the clothes their older siblings wore -- ill-fitting, past the point of cleaning, often torn.

But this year, this year -- we had the joy of giving them new clothes for New Year's.

They lined up with great anticipation, barefoot, in front of the roadside huts that they live in, cobbled together from plastic scraps. And to each child, we gave a wrapped parcel, which they tore open and shrieked with delight. Clothes! New Year's clothes!

All of them ran to their huts to put the clothes on right away, and five minutes later they were all back,

beaming with delight, and dressed to the nines.

The looks on their faces -- indescribable.

It was a moment of such joy that I felt privileged to witness it.

But that **joyful** moment was born out of a moment I also witnessed, a moment which was one of the worst we'd experienced in India.

Last year, one evening in India,
the kids in my group were coming out of a restaurant,
laughing, joking, teasing each other about who'd eaten the hottest curry.
And then -- they were pulled up short by what they saw in front of them:
They saw a group of slum children, like the ones we help,
being chased across a busy intersection by the doorman at the restaurant,
who was yelling at them to get lost, and throwing rocks at them like they were animals.
(And who would even do that to animals).
All they'd wanted was some spare change, some leftover food, anything.
With rocks raining down on them, they ran, terrified, into the darkness.
Our kids, our teens, were so shaken they couldn't speak,
and when they did begin to speak, they cried.

And when they came home, here, to Fairfield,
one of them, Cameron Luther, decided he had to do something. Something good.
He started a club at Fairfield Warde High School,
and those teens raised enough money for us this year to give food and hygiene kits and
school supplies and, yes, brand new clothes for New Year's
to children in the slums.
That's where those clothes came from.
Cameron, and all those kids last year, saw something evil in front of them,
And they decided to be a power for good. A power for good.

They're not alone, though.
Three years ago now, a girl in this church,
a sixth grader, listened to me and David telling stories about the people in India,
and it hurt her heart. And she wanted to do something.
She wanted to be a power for good.
So Devenny Widmer got a bunch of her friends together,
and they came up with an idea called Pennies for People.
And they told us all to start bringing in our pennies,
and that was three years ago, and we're still doing it
-- and the money that they've raised takes care of elderly widows
who had no family and no love and now have both.
Those girls heard about something wrong in this world,
and chose to be a power for good.

Think for a moment about that phrase I keep saying.

A power for good.

Think for a moment about when else you've heard it in this worship service.

I'll tell you when.

When we stood up, all of us, and spoke the words of this church's covenant, the promise that we make to one another as a church family.

We promise [as I told the kids] to take care of each other, yes, to support this church, yes,

but then the very last line -- the ultimate promise we make to one another and to God is this: we will strive to make this church *a power for good in the service of God and humanity*.

That's what we promise.

That's what we covenant.

We will be a power for good.

And we have young people among us who have already figured out how to do that, right round the world.

A lot has happened in this country since the last time I got up here to preach, back on Christmas Eve.

Remember the phrase "slow news day?"

Neither do I. We don't get those any more.

And it's been overwhelming.

I've lost count of the emails I've received, and the conversations I've had, that begin with "what are we supposed to do?"

Here in this church, the answer is simple.

Not easy, but simple:

We are supposed to be a power for good.

We are called to be a power for good.

Waaaaay back when that old covenant was written, **and** right now:

Greenfield Hill Church is to be a power for good.

We have promised it before God.

We have promised each other.

Friday night, David and I went up to my old stomping ground,

Yale Divinity School --

and with hundreds of other people,

we squeezed into its old chapel to hear a Southern preacher proclaim the Gospel to us.

It was Rev. William Barber, a Disciples of Christ pastor from North Carolina,

who years ago started a witness for peace and justice called Moral Mondays. They gather every Monday, *every* Monday, outside the state legislature to bear witness for the hurting and the helpless of his state, from the Appalachian families of the mountains sickened by coal ash in their water to the elderly struggling to pay their medical bills.

And in a chapel where all the greatest ministers of our tradition have spoken the word, William Barber preached it, boy did he preach it.

And he reminded us of the first words Jesus himself preached, to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth:

I have come, Jesus said, to bring good news to the poor, and let the oppressed go free.

We are called, William Barber said, to bring good news.

We are called to be a power for good.

We, the people of the church, are called to be the voice of what is **moral**, and what is right.

And -- he said -- "this isn't a liberal thing or a conservative thing,

This isn't a Democrat thing or a Republican thing."

He said "there are some things that are just *wrong*."

And we have to do what's right."

Just like my young friends in India last year saw something wrong and knew they had to work for what's right.

This past week, David and I sent out a letter to the church, because something was just wrong.

We told you about a family our church had been getting ready to welcome *this* coming Tuesday.

We told you that this family was a refugee mom and her four children who had fled for their lives from a country torn by war, who'd been checked and rechecked and vetted and revetted, and, after years in the refugee camp, were now ready to find home.

And we told you about our heartbreak that they were now banned.

From our hearts we told you that was wrong.

But here in this church we've seen all that's right.

Here in this church we have folks -- a whole lot of you --

who have been working so hard for so long to be a power for good.

For the past six months, since our Refugee Resettlement Committee got underway, a crazy number of you have stopped by with gifts for newly-arriving families, sent us boxes upon boxes of household goods, brought us beds and desks and dressers and clothes. One of you, an artist, created cheerful art to hang on the children's walls. You have been a power for good. And now with your compassion, and your letters and your voices, and yes, your tears, you continue to be a power for good.

There will be more moments in the days and months ahead: more moments to call out what is wrong and speak for what is right, more times to be Christ-followers. More times to be a power for good.

That's okay.
That's what we're here for. That's what we've promised to be.

Usually I **begin** my sermons by talking about the scripture I've chosen. Today I'm going to close with it. I had Carole read the passage about Love today, that famous passage from First Corinthians 13 that most everybody's heard in a wedding at some point -- and if you've heard it once you've probably heard it ten times. Love is patient, it says, love is kind. Love bears all things, believes all things.

What most people don't know is that the apostle Paul didn't write those words to be used in weddings -- in fact, he'd probably be pretty surprised by that. He wrote those words to a **church**, not a couple. He wrote those words to a bunch of Christians in a church in Corinth because he wanted to remind them what it meant to **be church**. And what he told them was that he wanted them to be a power for good. He wanted them to show the world what is right, and good and true. Be **Love**, he was saying. Let everyone around you see it. Love is patient, love is kind -- be that.

Love is not arrogant or rude.

Love never rejoices in the wrong, but rejoices in the right.

Be that Love.

Believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

Be that Love that never ends.

Be that power of good.

Well, that's what we've covenanted this morning.

That's what we've proclaimed.

Now - let's live our promises. Amen.