

Power With

Matthew 2:13-23. *Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."*

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."*

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

People believe the wierdest things. And many of those strange beliefs go under the name of "Christian." While my family was on the road or the holidays, Scott read aloud to us from the book, *Why People Believe Weird Things* by Michael Schermer. Schermer has a scientific mind. I like his ideas, but he overlooks some of the big reasons Christians believe weird things: because they think they have to, to be Christian. Or even because they'll go to hell if they don't. I am grateful to be a part of this community, IUCC, and the greater United Church of Christ, in which I have *freedom* of belief. Some of *my* beliefs may be weird, but I come by them honestly. They're mine. Nobody here expects us to believe, as the Queen does in *Through the Looking Glass*, "as many as six impossible things before breakfast." I am sad to realize how many people think that in order to be Christian, we have to believe not only impossible things, but things that I find downright scary.

What are some things Christians may believe that you have trouble believing? Or, (you can say it here, it's safe) that you don't believe? This time of year Virgin Birth comes to mind. It was a great explanation for Jesus being both human and divine 2000 years ago; it never worked for me. Trinity? I like that one. I can't explain it, though, and I learned in Seminary that neither can anybody else.

Our beliefs do matter. Some of them matter a lot. I remember talking to a man at a lunch table at the Santa Ana Courthouse. He was Indian, or maybe Pakistani. We were on a jury together. I told him I was studying to be a Christian pastor. He looked at me in silence for a while, and then hesitantly he said, “I have a question. I am not a Christian. What do you believe about me?” What he didn’t say out loud was, “Am I going to hell then?” I answered him, “I believe in a God who loves everyone. Nonchristians too.” As I watched, he relaxed and smiled. I’m quite sure *he* didn’t believe he was going to hell. He just didn’t feel comfortable eating with someone else who believed that way. Something about acceptance, maybe.

It came up again, in a seminary theology class. Our professor, Marjorie Suchocki, was explaining her personal belief that everybody goes to heaven– whether they like it or not! One of my fellow students was outraged. “If there’s no hell, why would anybody bother going to church anymore?” A few of us still do. Perhaps some of you would enjoy telling her why.

Tragically, many people, Christian and nonchristian, think Christianity mean believing in God who judges and punishes for not believing the right things, or obeying the right rules. Joss Whedon, a writer whose work I love, says that he does not believe in what he calls “the Sky Bully.” Elizabeth Gilbert, who speaks openly about her personal religious experience in the popular book *Eat, Pray, Love*, confesses, “I can’t follow that one fixed rule of Christianity insisting that Christ is the *only* path to God. Strictly speaking then, I can’t call myself a Christian.” Will somebody please set these people straight?

This is what we don’t believe. So what do you believe? Can you tell me? It’s easier to say what you don’t believe than what you do, isn’t it? Maybe that’s why belief gets reduced to memorized creeds, because it’s hard work putting words to what matters most. I believe a few things. Because of my science background I don’t get beliefs mixed up with facts. I just live by them. At the core of my belief is that the sacred is with us, not far away, and that the power of the sacred is creative and loving, and that power seeks partnership with us so that creativity and loving can take concrete shape in our relationships and in our world, and we can thrive and be fully human. I believe that God practices **Power With**. I believe that Power With is the way we were meant to treat each other.

And I believe that we humans too often choose Power Over, imagining that in order to be right ourselves, we must make someone else wrong. In order to matter, we must make somebody else less than us, less than fully worthy or accepted or human. That is the only way I can figure that Christians ever got from “Love your neighbor as yourself,” to, “If you don’t believe like us, you’re going to hell.”

I first got an understanding of Power Over and Power With from Walter Wink in his book *Engaging the Powers*. He calls Power Over the “Domination System,” and Power With the “Kingdom of God.” Through my work with Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication I am learning a practical way of living out Power With... more of the time, anyway. Power Over means the ones on top decide and the rest submit, or are punished. Power With means everyone matters, and everyone has at least some choice. Power Over is about control. Power With is riskier. You never know what’s going to happen when people really connect heart to heart.

I get my belief in Power With from the life and teachings of Jesus. The record of his ministry is not consistently Power With. I like to believe that Jesus was consistent, and that the gospel writers mixed their own ingrained beliefs in Power Over into their stories. (Matthew is the worst. Almost all the hell in the New Testament is in the book of Matthew.) What does Power With look like when Jesus lives it out?

It is talking with, and eating with, and caring about anyone, regardless of class or condition or disease. It is speaking honestly about what really matters. It is looking into the eyes of the people you meet and seeing beyond labels and status to discover the yearning heart of another human being. It takes some practice, but it's not really so hard to read hearts. What's hard is breaking out of the habits of Power Over, of treating people as objects. Power With requires tremendous courage and commitment and vulnerability.

I guess most people don't believe that Power With is divine power or even effective power, because they have barely experienced it. Power Over has been the way of the world, in most places and times. And yet, countless ordinary people have lived it, and in the last century we were privileged to see great nonviolent social movements arise as people rediscovered Power With. It works. It's simple, but it's not easy. People who practice Power With often do not directly dismantle the structures of oppression that are Power Over. Instead they choose to live as if Power Over doesn't apply, and they pay the price, gladly, in order to be fully alive and fully connected with God and people.

Did anyone notice that our scripture reading today was not a happy story? King Herod had been told by the Wise Men that a child had been born to rule the Jews. He was in fear of losing his power, so he had all the babies around Bethlehem killed. This event, called "the slaughter of the innocents," is not historical. Matthew took liberties telling us this story. He got the character of Herod right, though. While he did not kill these particular children, Herod did have three of his own sons murdered. Herod the Great, ruler of Jewish Palestine (under the Roman Emperor) from 37 BCE to 4 CE, was desperate for Power Over. When he was near death, he apparently arranged that a group of political prisoners would be slain at the time of his death so that people would be in the streets mourning at the time of his funeral.

The end of Herod's long rule showed Power Over at its most warped and pathetic. Likewise there are plenty of slaughters of innocents in our own time. Yet Power Over is usually much more subtle than this.

It has to be subtle, because Power Over is a zero-sum game. There are winners and losers. How do you get the people on the bottom, the losers, to play this zero-sum game? Well, you have to convince them they have no choice but to play this game of Power Over. You can just use violence, rule them by fear, as Herod did late in his career. But that's messy and dangerous. So Power Over tells the people stories to convince us that Power Over is necessary; there is no other game. Power Over stories have been told many ways.

Patriarchy: Someone has to hold the power and make the decisions. It must be the senior man of the family or clan. Do as he says; he has absolute power. We are starting to see though that story, aren't we?

Just Following Orders: I have no choice. I'm just following the law, my superior's orders. (Response of Nazis when asked why they committed atrocities at war crimes trials.)

Economic Indicators: They're going up, so all is well, whether or not *you* have food, shelter or health care. What's wrong with you? And if they're going down, shut up and work harder; it's not our fault.

I'm sure you can think of other Power Over stories. Don't forget the one that is so heartbreaking for me— *Religious Exclusivism*: Believe the way we tell you or you're going to hell.

However the stories are told, Power Over tries to convince you that you have no choice but to submit. Power Over uses enemies: the foreigner, the disobedient, the scapegoat— to scare you, and to focus your anger and hurt somewhere other than at the people on top. And Power Over always has violence, as its last resort, to keep the losers from taking power.

Jesus shows us a different way: Power With. Power With is a game with infinite possibilities. Everybody contributes, because the point is to care, and to contribute to meet everyone's needs. We Christians like to say it this way: "Love your neighbor as yourself." And even, "Love your enemies." Which means you can't really have any enemies, can you? Practicing Power With, there are few fixed rules, because we do what works best to care for one another. Like the way Jesus taught. Power With is creative, a little chaotic: roles are changing because people change, and everybody matters, so there are lots of voices talking!

Power With is also in this little story from the Gospel according to Matthew. Yes folks, according to the Book, Jesus was an immigrant, and a political refugee. In Matthew's imaginative piety, Jesus fleeing for his life to Egypt is true to type, because throughout his ministry he is continually standing with the human beings on the bottom: the outcast, the rejected, the oppressed. He never forced Power Over anyone. Nor did he submit to the powers of his time, religious or political, though it cost him his life.

When we talk about stories of Jesus' birth, we can keep those power issues at arm's length, as ancient history, or legend. What about Power Over in *our* lives? What does it look like in Irvine, California? Try these examples. One company, that owns virtually all the rental property in the city, and charges \$2000 a month for cramped rundown apartments across from UCI. More and more gated communities, to keep out the riff-raff. The invisible army of mostly Spanish-speaking people who come early in the morning on busses and in late model cars to do our work for us. Brokers ready to mortgage you into foreclosure.

We are not charged with revolution, throwing over all those Powers – maybe a few of them we can. We are invited to see these Powers Over as they are, systems that too often dehumanize people, and to rediscover the humanity they would deny us. That is Power With.

Let me take it one step closer to home. Power Over is our personal labels and blinders that keep us from treating each person we meet as a human being, either because that person is under us, or over us, or on the wrong side. Power With is breaking through those barriers to build relationships based on mutual care.

I have a new business card for my Nonviolent Communication training and coaching. It says I am a “Compassionate Communication Specialist.” That doesn’t mean I always manage to live the kind of Power With that I want to. It does mean I know how, and I also know when I’m blowing it. Not long ago, I was challenged in an NVC training by a man who didn’t believe nonviolence was effective. I judged him a worthy opponent (he was a retired university professor) so I did my best to explain why I was right and he was wrong: verbal Power Over. I’m a master at that, with all my time in graduate school. Then I realized I was modeling the opposite of the kind of heart-to-heart communication that I intended. A few weeks later I got a similar challenge. This man was not well educated. I judged him too stubborn or slow. I told him he just didn’t get it, and so I dismissed his concerns, more Power Over. Ouch.

All our lives we have learned Power Over. We have much to unlearn. There is another way. It is the way we are born knowing, and that we can learn again. Join me in seeking to practice Power With, the way to be fully human, the way Jesus shows us. And if you believe in this Way, tell people about it, because many people do not even know it exists.