

Inscribed over the entranceway of a church in NYC reads the words, “Power drives us to the brink of the Holy.” Provocative words, aren’t they? Power drives us to the brink of the Holy. What power? The power of God? The power of a commercial world surrounding this New York church? The fossil fuels that propel the subways and taxis? What power drives us to the brink of the Holy?

In our reading this morning from Exodus we find ourselves in the midst of a power struggle. This is a clash of two mighty forces. On the one side is Pharaoh, representing the political-military-industrial complex of the world. His is the power that can only control by force and coercion and enslavement and bondage, that sees humankind as a means to Pharaoh’s own end, which is power and acquisition. On the other side is YHWH, the God of Israel, who seeks relationship and covenant with the people of Israel. Here is the creator of all things, the ultimate power of the universe. That is how the writers of Exodus show YHWH. The God of Israel flexes an arm, and plagues descend upon Pharaoh and Egypt, until Pharaoh is broken through the deaths of his eldest son and the eldest sons of every Egyptian family. Pharaoh cries, “Uncle,” kind of. He sets the Israelites free. The Israelites leave quickly, heading back to the land YHWH promised them, a land flowing with milk and honey. But the power struggle is not over. We are to understand the full might of YHWH. And so YHWH hardens the heart of Pharaoh, sending the full political-military-industrial complex of Pharaoh hot on Israel’s heels.

These powers have brought the Israelites to a brink, the brink of the Red Sea (or Reed Sea, depending on your translation). We know the rest of this story well; it is the story that largely has defined the Judeo-Christian faith. Trapped between swords and spears and chariots on one side and watery death on the other, YHWH opens a way before the Israelites through the sea, so that they are able to safely pass through the waters, waters that then turn and drown the pursuing Egyptian political-military-industrial complex. Power has defeated power; as the songwriters of our scriptures repeat from this point forward, “Mighty is our Lord; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

These are the powers that have brought the Israelites to the brink of the holy, to the brink of new life. The power of Pharaoh that drove them to the sea’s threshold is the power to enslave, the power to control, the power to build up, the power to take life, the power to make war. The power of Pharaoh inspires escape – flee! runaway! – from death and enslavement to the promise of new life. And the power of God is altogether different. God’s is truly an awe-inspiring power: the power to free, the power to give life, the power to plague and take life, the power to control the human heart, the power to control natural forces. The power of God draws them to this brink of the holy.

But there is a third power, the power of the Israelites and, – dare we suggest it? – our power as well. After their complaining the Israelites are left with a choice. They can take up the power of their own military-industrial complex; they can turn and fight Pharaoh and Pharaoh’s army. Who knows? With God on their side they can easily overcome insurmountable odds and defeat Pharaoh’s army. Or they can choose to turn away from Pharaoh’s way, and enter into an uncertain and watery path whose way is frightening and without a sure end. The Israelites chose to exert a power of their own as they stood on the brink of the Holy. They exerted the power of faith, the power to resist conflict, the power to submit to God’s will – however unnatural and scary it might appear. The power of Pharaoh and the power of God brought them to the brink of the holy; only the power of the Israelites to submit to God allowed them to enter the holy, to enter the way to new life.

If the words over the NY church ring true – power drives us to the brink of the Holy – whether it be the power of God guiding us near or the power of the world that sends us fleeing – only our power to submit to God’s will allows us to pass through the portal that leads to new life. We can find in our lives so many ways this may be true. But I would like to draw our attention to just one aspect: Peter’s question in the gospel this morning, and Jesus’ response, for Peter’s question more than anything else is about power.

“How many times must I forgive one who sins against me?” Peter asks. “Will seven times cut it?” In short Peter is asking, “When can I be done with this guy, who is such a bane to my life? When can I wipe him away, annihilate him, like Pharaoh’s army crushing a people?” You see to withhold forgiveness from one who is repentant and sorry is to exercise a power over that person. There is a power that the wronged party can wield, and this can be great indeed. Perhaps that is why Jesus responds in part to Peter’s question with the parable of the unforgiving servant.

In this parable Jesus frames forgiveness in terms of a power differential. What must be forgiven is debt, money owed, potential wealth, a tangible good that readily translates into livelihood, prestige, and power. The servant’s debt is fantastic, beyond his ability to overcome. The debt has brought him to the brink of despair. Pharaoh’s army has come a’knockin’. But the servant’s master gives him a way out. Waters part, and his debt is forgiven. All he has to do is turn and follow that uncertain path of living as one forgiven, living as one who has been given his life back, living as one who has seen that true power lies in the acquiescence of power to love. This servant has been driven by the power of debt to the brink of holiness. But rather than following the path of one forgiven the servant turns away. He turns back to Pharaoh – well, turns into Pharaoh – and actually surrenders love to power when he refuses to forgive another’s debt. In essence, Jesus tells Peter that to forgive is to submit oneself completely to love. When you have done so you stop counting or worrying about an endpoint.

I am not sure that Peter fully receives the answer to his question about forgiveness until much later. I am reminded of a different power struggle, a power struggle by another sea. Jesus has been crucified, and the disciples have found his tomb empty. Although they have seen the risen Christ, finding themselves brought to the brink of the Holy, they nevertheless have returned to their previous lives, as if nothing had changed (not unlike the unforgiving servant). They re-enter the sea, again as fishers of fish. Here in this scene from John’s gospel, in the pre-dawn hours the resurrected Jesus watches his followers toiling at fishing on the sea, to no avail. Perhaps you know this story well, how Jesus has them cast their nets to a different side, and their nets are filled. We find the risen Christ providing for those who deserted him, giving them abundant fish and preparing a meal for them. And here after the meal, perhaps most poignantly Peter finally gets the answer to his question about forgiveness in the form of three questions, “Simon, do you love me? Simon, son of John, do you love me? Simon, do you love me?” Jesus asks. Three times Peter denied Jesus; three times he is able to say – really given the privilege of saying, “Yes, Lord, I love you.” Jesus has parted a way for Simon Peter, and Peter asserts his own power by submitting and following that way that is love. In the process Peter is emptied out (receiving forgiveness does that to a person, as does forgiving). But Peter is not left vacuous, empty. He receives back from Jesus his vocation of love, which is simply an expression of who Peter truly is: each time Peter affirms his love for Christ Peter hears his calling, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

The inscription over the portal to the church reads: “Power drives us to the brink of the Holy.” Turning into and receiving the Holy is our power to exercise. It is the power of to receive

forgiveness, the power to receive God's unconditional love, the power to surrender the pride and hubris that chases us in chariots seeking to destroy us. To forgive and be forgiven is to realize that there is only one true power in this world that creates and gives life, and that is the power of God's love, a power that knows no differential. When we empty ourselves of all power but the power to fully receive and share this love, well then we receive ourselves back fulfilled. May God grant us this power that we may truly forgive, and truly know forgiveness. And may Christ grant us the grace to turn from Pharaoh and follow the "unnatural and watery" way that God has opened for us, our true vocation, the vocation that expresses God's love in the world.