

True Power

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Psalm 52; Luke 10:38-42
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How do we gain true power? How do we experience, in our own lives, the kind of power that lasts and endures and heals? Washington, DC, is a city of power, it is a city at the center of the universe, where power is traded and acquired and used. But what we know, in our own bones, is that the power that is craved in this city lives on a very tense and fragile foundation. It does not last, it cannot be trusted and relied upon, and healing is not its primary intent.

Last week, with our texts from Luke 10 and Psalm 82, we observed the Bible's claim about the *true God*, the God of the Bible revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, and how the true God is a God who is attentive to people and situations and parts of ourselves that are poor and vulnerable. This week, with the story of Martha and Mary, along with Psalm 82, we can see what the Bible wants to teach us about the nature of *true power*. According to these texts, true power is not found – as our world, and our area here in the DMV in particular, would have us believe - in the force and frenzy of human activity and achievement and performance and striving. According to the Bible, true power comes from being deeply grounded in God's presence and God's guidance. Being *inwardly still* provides you with a source of strength that will not be moved and that will heal you and the world, whereas forceful human striving turns out to be much less effective over the long haul than we would ordinarily suppose.

Psalm 52 draws a very sharp contrast between a person whom the psalmist derisively refers to as "O mighty one" and the psalmist themselves. The "mighty one" we may imagine to be a person of power and prominence, someone who is wreaking a lot of havoc in the lives of others, someone who plots destruction and mischief and treachery and evil and deceit and lying. With a wide-ranging vocabulary for destructive behavior, the psalm emphasizes the pain that is being generated by this powerful person.

We may imagine that the "mighty one" in the psalm is an utterly self-absorbed, self-enclosed person. They spend all of their time plotting destruction, which is to say, they are using all of their time and energy to further their own agenda. It is unlikely that the person woke up one morning and thought to themselves, "I'm going to work some treachery today." Instead, they woke up and focused all of their energy on driving their own agenda, which did not take into account the needs of others or the will of God. It is easy for us to see this kind of self-absorbed, destructive behavior in our enemies and our opponents. It is a whole lot harder for us to notice when we have fallen into these kinds of patterns ourselves.

Greedy, ego-driven people like this can become very powerful for a while, but according to the psalm, their power will not last. "God will break you down," the psalm says, "God will snatch you from your tent; God will uproot you from the land of the living." Life that is lived in raw, frenetic pursuit of control and prestige and reputation cannot endure, but will eventually fall apart or come undone in some way. The path to worldly power turns out to be a dead end. It doesn't go anywhere.

How do we turn away from becoming self-enclosed people who crave worldly power, and in the process, end up harming the common good? It ends up being about *where we turn*. Last week's parable from Luke 10 taught us to *turn to the Other*, to pattern our lives after the Samaritan who turned to aside to someone who was radically different and who was in need. "Go and do likewise," Jesus told the lawyer. Today's story from Luke 10 teaches us to *turn to God* for our grounding and for our strength.

Turn to the Other, and turn to God.

Today's story, about Martha and Mary, reminds us that just *doing* lots of things in the world is not always the answer, even if they are good things. *Action and activity* are essential parts of our lives, but if we engage in constant activity, it can become hazardous to our health. One chief hazard of activity is that activity can become busyness. We can become so busy that we forget why we are doing the things we are doing. We simply do them because we've always done them. And when that happens, we cut ourselves off from our true power source.

I have a tremendous amount of sympathy for Martha. I see a lot of myself in Martha, and I see a lot of people whom I love in Martha. Martha is occupied with showing hospitality to Jesus. So occupied in fact, that the text tells us that she has become "distracted." Jesus and his disciples have come to their village, and Martha, the text says, has welcomed him into her home. She is trying to get a meal ready, she's getting the house ready for her guest, and she is very busy. We know what that feels like. Hospitality is important work, and she could use a bit of help with all that must be done, but her sister Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him as a disciple listens to him, and she is not lifting a finger to help her overburdened sister.

Martha wishes that her sister would get up, off her seat, and help a little. But rather than addressing Mary directly about this, Martha triangulates about her sister to Jesus. "Mary's left all the work to me, Jesus, and that's not right. You tell her to get up and help." Though we're not told for sure, I get the feeling that this isn't the first time Martha's felt like her sister wasn't working as hard as she should.

Jesus says to Martha, very tenderly, "Martha, Martha, you worry so much. Mary's doing what she needs to be doing right now." This text has been misused over the years to shame Martha. Jesus has no desire to shame Martha here. He is calling Martha back to her source, back to her true power.

Martha's activity has become "distracted." The Greek word means "to be dragged around," as though Martha is being dragged around by her expectations of how she wants things to go. Without being nourished by prayerful quiet, our lives of action can too easily become distracted, and our deeds of hospitality and service can become saturated with resentment of others. Our active love of neighbor needs to be grounded in our prayerful love of God. And our love of God gets expressed in our love of neighbor.

Martha could get a lot done. Martha's problem was that she would become "distracted." It can be hard to hear the still, small voice of God if you are rushing around at breakneck speed. God is very patient, and God may just decide to wait to speak to us until we have stopped all our busyness. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard has said that something that is true when it is whispered, may cease to be true if shouted.

People in Washington, DC, can get a lot done. We can be quite busy. But this busyness can sometimes be achieved at the cost of attending to the slower, deeper rhythms of God's grace and love for us in Jesus Christ. It also means that we can live under great pressure to perform, to succeed, to impress. High school students feel this pressure to get into the "right schools," young adults feel this pressure when well-intentioned people ask that dreaded question, "So what do you do?", many people feel the need to make as much money as possible before retiring since the costs of living in this country keep going up and up and up. So we keep at it and keep busy, trying to accumulate influence and power. But in the process, we cut ourselves off from our true power source.

According to the Bible, true and lasting power does not come from human force and frenzy and achievement and striving. Lasting power comes from being deeply grounded in the presence and guidance of Jesus. Jesus is always present with us, and Jesus is always available to offer guidance to us. The challenge is that we are not always present to him, and we do not always seek his guidance, and part of the reason that we do not do that is that we are so busy. Jesus has no interest in shaming us when we are busy. But we may imagine that he looks at us in the tender way that he looks at Martha and says something like, "You are worried and distracted by so many things; there is need of only one thing." Stay connected to me, abide in me, as I abide in you, and then you will bear much fruit.

Are there ways that you have become worried and distracted, practically dragged around by expectations about how things ought to be, and have become cut off you're your deeper, true source of power? Are there things to which you might need to say 'no', in order to create space in your day for staying connected to God? Are there things you might need to turn off in order to give yourself space and time to be grounded in God's presence, so that your action can come from a place of durability and power that lasts? Where is your true power source?

To the triune God, and to God alone, be all the glory. AMEN.