

“Change Bearer” based on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and Mark 1:21-28

In the midst of all the news that swirled around this week, one little line caught my ear. A Congressman was accused of sexual harassment of a staff member, and within his reply was the idea that he didn't think he had any power over her. He thought she could consent, or could reject his advances, because he ran an egalitarian office. In fact, he was quoted as describing his office saying, “There is no hierarchy.”¹

I've heard such malarkey before, and it infuriated me then too. Most significantly, at one point a District Superintendent informed me that he didn't think of himself as having power “over” the clergy in his district. This came up in a conversation when I was indicating that I didn't think he should date clergy he was supervising, and he was justifying his behavior. Simply denying the power one has isn't the same thing as not having it.

To be fair, at almost the same time, I had an awakening that resulted in an ah-ha moment of my own. I was serving on the “Conference Leadership Team” for the Upper New York Annual Conference. I was regularly in meetings making big decisions, had regular time on stage during Annual Conference meetings, received subtle deference from colleagues because of my role, and had even shared in DRAFTING the structure of the Conference itself. AT THE SAME TIME, I was really unhappy with the way the conference existed in the world and felt helpless to make the changes I thought we needed. During an Annual Conference session, when I was on the floor with everyone else, someone mentioned feeling disempowered and uninformed in the Conference. I ALMOST empathized by saying “me too!” but JUST BARELY kept my mouth shut.

I realized that while I felt disempowered, uninformed, and generally cranky, I had about as much power in the system as ANYONE did. In particular, I had a heck of a lot more power than the person who was (rightfully) expressing his own concerns. And I realized that if I had spoken, and claimed to be as disempowered as he was, I'd have created a false equivalency. I simply wasn't disempowered in that system at that time, even if I didn't feel like I had the power to do what I wanted.

In that moment, I realized that I'd done a similar thing to the District Superintendent – I'd internally downplayed my own power. Downplaying, or ignoring, the power I held was dangerous because it made it much easier to abuse the power. Whenever a person ignores a power they hold, and pretends it doesn't exist, that enables the person to wield it irresponsibly and ignore the consequences for those who don't have as much power.

At that point I made a commitment to myself to ACKNOWLEDGE and NOTICE what power I do hold, and attend to holding it carefully, so that I wouldn't do accidental harm with it. I wanted to operate differently than those I saw abusing their power, and I wanted to have more integrity than I started with, once I saw the error of my ways.

Sometimes it is uncomfortable to acknowledge power differentials. Actually, it is often uncomfortable. (Perhaps especially in progressive circles where hierarchy is less valued.) It is far easier to pretend away hierarchy and to claim that the limits on our power make it useless. However, it is irresponsible and hugely dangerous.

The District Superintendent was engaged in sexual harassment (at least), and his SELF-JUSTIFICATION for it was in pretending away his power. His power over those he supervised didn't dissipate when he pretended it away though. It didn't give those he supervised easy ways to ignore or dismiss his advances. It just meant he didn't take that into account, and he got what he wanted without acknowledging to himself that he'd done so with the power he wielded. It meant he took away both others' consent and his responsibility for having done so.

¹ Chris Cillizza, “Oh, Pat Meehan. No, no, no, no.” on CNN politics
<https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/24/politics/meehan-analysis/index.html> accessed on 1/25/18

This congressman did exactly the same thing. It is hard to believe that anyone who has the power to hire and fire their staff could be under the impression that their office is egalitarian, but clearly this misconception benefited the congressman and in his head justified his actions.

I suspect that ignoring the power one has over another is a common part of justifying sexual harassment, and many other abuses of power.

There is, however, an even more sickening reality. There are also those among us who claim the fullness of their power and authority and use it to harm others. In this case I'm talking about the Larry Nassars of the world, who not only set himself up to be in a position over young girls, he ENJOYED the ways that he was able to harm and humiliate them.

Larry Nassar, the "medical doctor" who worked with USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University, who used his power to sexually assault more than 100 girls. Around Larry Nassar and those like him, are a set of people around them who functioned with their power in a third problematic way. Unlike that congressman who pretended away his power and thus allowed himself to use it inappropriately, AND unlike Larry who claimed his power fully to do harm, there are those who had the opportunity to use their power for good and didn't. There are likely more reasons for this than individuals who didn't act, but the results are all the same: more children traumatically abused.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it."² There have been many, many people in the world who have passively accepted evil, and even used their power to silence those speaking of it.

One of the many gymnasts abused by Nassar was Rachael Denhollander. She was far from the first to speak out, but she was the first one to do so with her evidence and accusations prepared to force herself to be heard. Those defending him tried to silence her in many ways, but she kept talking anyway. She spoke with clarity and authority during his sentencing hearing saying, "I believed the adults at MSU surrounding Larry would do the right thing if they were aware of what Larry was doing, and I was terribly wrong. And discovering that I could not only not trust my abuser but I could not trust the people surrounding him has been devastating. It is part of the consequences of sexual assault, and it needs to be taken seriously."³

That is, Larry Nassar's actions were an atrocity. So was the enormous cover up, people who decided that maintaining the status quo, or getting the next win, or keeping the organization from liability, or not upsetting the apple cart was more important than the protection of CHILDREN from sexual assault. Many, many people had the power and authority to step in and stop his actions, and they did not do it.

Thus far, I've mentioned three ways power and authority is misused:

1. by being dismissed or ignored, and thus held irresponsibility.
2. by being used directly and intentionally to cause harm.
3. by being held passively, not being used to help those in need, which functions to support an abuser over the abused. (In some cases this crosses the line into intentional harm as well.)

² <https://paradoxologies.org/2010/08/28/martin-luther-king-jr-on-complacency-mlk/> accessed on 1/25/18

³ Alanna Vagianos "She Was The First Woman To Go Public About Nassar. Read Her Statement In Full"

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/rachael-denhollander-nassar-impact-statement_us_5a690ef6e4b0e563007627aa 01/24/2018 08:46 pm ET accessed on 1/25/18

This is all very interesting to consider when we have a Gospel passage that takes note that Jesus held power and authority very differently than the religious authorities of his day! Oye ve. “He taught as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.” This the thesis statement of or Gospel reading! His authority is said to be amazing to the people who heard it, it was one of the first things that drew a crowd to him.

The early Christian communities whose stories of Jesus formed the Gospels may well have thought that Jesus' authority seemed different because it was different. They may have thought that his connect to God was different than everyone else's, and this may have been their point. Or, it may be that the scribes taught as if they were a bit removed from the text, teaching what other people had taught them, raising the historical questions, doing everything other than speaking about God from their own experience and claiming authority from their experience. (I may also be projecting myself onto the scribes, as I often choose that path.)

Or, perhaps it was something else entirely. When I listen holistically to the stories of Jesus, it seems that one of the themes is his work of empowering the people. Apparently “authority” in Greek means more fully “the freedom to express one's powers.”⁴ Perhaps he was using his “authority” to build up those he was speaking to. In this case, I'm drawing on the line from 1 Corinthians, “Knowledge puffs up, love builds up.” Authority used well builds up people, in love. It isn't used for the sake of the one who holds it, it is used for the well-being of the community that gives it.

Jesus speaking in the synagogue would have been speaking in his own voice, not just that of the tradition, but I suspect he was using his voice and his authority to encourage others to claim their voices and their authority in building the kingdom of God. He was building them up so they could build others up and everyone together could build the kingdom.

That's what it looks like to change the world. Power and authority used in the ways of the world are used to PUFF up the one who holds them, and to push down those who don't. We've talked about many ways they can be used to do harm. But our goal is not only to “do no harm” but ALSO then to “do all the good we can”. (The first two of John Wesley's “Three Simple Rules” as rethought by Reuben Job.) That means that ALL power and authority we have should be used to BUILD up.

This is a rather high calling. And it can be difficult. There are pitfalls in many directions, and discomfort to go along with it all. But that doesn't mean it should be attempted. We are, all of us, leaders in building up the kingdom, and the first work of the kingdom is building others UP.

So, dear ones, may we follow in the way of Jesus, and find the ways to use our power and authority to BUILD others up. Amen

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Pronouns: she/her/hers

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⁴ *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 61.