

What makes you feel empowered? What is it that gives you/us the authority to do something? A badge? (I have one - it was given to me by the Fire Chief as we left for the Philippines. He hated speeches so just gave me the badge I had used during my ten years on the department. It has no empowerment or use now - just a memory of days gone by). A letter from the boss/principal? The encouragement and support of friends? Ordination? How do we feel empowered?

When I was chaplain at Elliot Hospital in Manchester, NH, we had to wear the same white coats that the MD's wore. It was hospital policy. It empowered us to go places that were off-limits to others. We were "authorized personnel". We could see patients' charts and even write in them, if needed. No one questioned what we were doing as long as we had the white coats on. We were empowered.

Today's Scripture lessons have two stories of empowerment: Nehemiah and Jesus. Nehemiah had the authority of the King. He had learned of the terrible situation in Jerusalem. The walls were in need of repair and the city was in need. He prayed and cried but tried to put on a good "face" before the King. However, as Nehemiah served in his role as cupbearer the King noted something different, something was not right. As he brings the plight of Jerusalem to the King, Nehemiah is empowered to go and repair the city. He is empowered to do the job under the authority of the King.

Now that the walls have been repaired it is time for the city to return to its religious roots. It is a day of listening to the Torah and having it explained. It is a day of joy and sadness (what they have not been doing). But, because they have heard and responded it is a day of joy and celebration. They were instructed to go home, to eat and to share what they have with those who are in need. It is a day of Good News. The people have once again been empowered by the Word.

Jesus had spent forty (40) days alone in the wilderness. He had fasted and been challenged by Satan. He was tempted and tested, according to Luke. Temptations come when he is at his weakest - hungry and alone. Now that he has passed the test he comes empowered by the Spirit. The words of Zechariah 4:6 are being fulfilled, "*..Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit.*" Might and power are not the answer - Jesus now comes empowered to carry out God's agenda to the world. It is not a new agenda, it is the one given by Isaiah:

- \* To give the Good News to the poor (those who the world would overlook)
- \* To set free those who are held prisoner (not in jails but to sin, etc)
- \* To give sight to the blind (to open our eyes to see the world through God's eyes and what God desires for the world)
- \* To release the oppressed (to give a freedom that the world cannot give - to be free in Christ - nothing can hold us back)

There was nothing wrong with these words — they were the prophet's. But when Jesus said these would be fulfilled in him, the response was not what one would expect. They wanted to kill him (more next week). They knew who he was, his family. Who was he to tell them what to do? Who was he to fulfill the prophecy? When we set our standards as Christ's standards the world cannot comprehend.

We, too, have been empowered to be like Christ. The same Spirit that empowered him as he came from the wilderness is available to us today. We have been empowered to go into all the world with the message of God's love, grace, forgiveness and hope. We are to present God's

love to the poor, the oppressed, those blinded by greed, ambition, etc. We have been empowered to change a world that does not want to be changed. Those in power do not want to give up their power. They do not want to give to those who are hungry and thirsty. There are those who even want to take what little the poor have and give it to those who have more than they will ever need.

Who wants to tell the oppressed that they are now free? Why should we give the people hope?

But, we have been empowered to be different. The master is to become like a servant. The first are to be last. To get we have to give. We have to open the doors that have been closed and welcome everyone. I found it interesting this week that a Seattle Times article described a social club in Ballard as a “church with a bar.” It has restricted membership and is not liking what newcomers are doing. (There was more to the article. The newcomers belong to another group that wants the land the club owns). But, I was intrigued by the description and wondered what image the author has of the church?

Jesus comes in the power of the Spirit to change the world. He goes against all that the world stands for. This is not how they have viewed or thought about God. This is not what they had expected in Messiah. Yet, this is Messiah, empowered by the Spirit coming to change the world. Empowered to love those who are not really that lovable. And, we have that same empowerment to love the world, forgive the world, to change the world.

Note, they wanted to kill him. And, they eventually would. They would try to silence those who would follow him. Remember the boldness of Peter and John before the religious leaders: *“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).*

We have been empowered to change the world and the world still does not want to be changed. The struggle is right here in Mountlake Terrace. There are some who want to restrict what the churches can do in the way of ministry. Why? Because one congregation wants to open a ministry to the homeless and some do not want this to happen. They do not see this as a “ministry” of the church. “This is not what the church should be doing,” they cry. I guess it is time to stage a Nehemiah day - assemble the people and read not the Torah but the Gospels. This IS what the people of God need to be doing. This is what Jesus and the Spirit empowers us to do. We are empowered to love and serve like Christ loved and served.

Let us get on with the task we have been empowered to do!

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NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985  
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989