

They Were Not Able

Roger Lovette

First Baptist Church, Clemson, South Carolina

If you want to read a disarming book as you prepare for Pentecost, I would suggest Barbara Tuchman's, *A Distant Mirror*. Ms. Tuchman, a historian, writes of one of the greatest disasters ever recorded in history—the Black Death of 1348-50 which swept across the world killing over one-third of the population from India to Iceland. She writes of that tortured fourteenth century and the causes of their maladies: “plague, war, taxes, brigandage, bad government, insurrection and schism in the church.”¹

What has intrigued me about her work are the parallels that the author has drawn between the fifty years following the Black Plague and what has happened to our world since World War I. She writes that almost the same complaints can be found in both ages: “economic chaos, social unrest, high prices, profiteering, depraved morals, lack of production, industrial indolence, frenetic gaiety, wild expenditure, luxury, debauchery, social and religious hysteria, greed, avarice, maladministration, decay of manners.”²

The central struggle of the Middle Ages was the reach for the divine and the lure of earthly things. Here we find a theme for Pentecost. Powerlessness seemed to sweep over people, nations, and even the world like a great tidal wave. They did not know what to do.

The Pentecost theme of power is set today in a world that also reckons with powerlessness. Arthur Schlesinger has written of our time: “Indeed, no social emotion is more widespread today than the conviction of personal powerlessness, the sense of being beset, beleaguered, and persecuted.”³ How well we know this sense of powerlessness: the mounting national debt, hunger so large and monstrous that we cannot even fathom the depths of the dilemma, terrorism, global fundamentalism, tribalism, not to speak of all the personal battles fought in offices and homes and churches everywhere. What do we say about the power of Pentecost in a world so destitute of power?

In Mark's transfiguration story we find help for our dilemma. First, we see Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. At the bottom of that same mountain we find another scene. Nine disciples huddle together around a convulsive boy. A father stands nearby wringing his hands and pleading with Jesus' commissioned disciples. We are told the boy has an evil and dumb spirit. Exorcism, for which the disciples had been granted power by Jesus, was demanded: but those followers could do nothing. Whispering, wondering, wishing they could help, the disciples stood powerless as the child grew worse.

To this scene Jesus came fresh from his retreat on the mountain. He could not understand the confusion. The father explained it all to Jesus: “My son is very ill. I brought him to your disciples to help. My boy falls down and convulses and hurts himself and grows worse. I begged your disciples to do something but they were not able.”

The Pentecost word "power" comes from the Latin *posse* "to be able." Here we find the opposite of power. They were not able. Running through that phrase is a commentary of so much in the life of today's church. Some wild power we do not understand wrenches the strength and health and hope of people and nations. In droves they come to us because they've exhausted their resources only to find what that desperate father found in Mark's story. They were not able.

No one has written more poignantly about this problem than Will Campbell in his love story, *Brother to a Dragonfly*. The story is Will's attempt to rescue his brother Joe, a druggist, from destruction. Joe is a drug addict, and brother Will tries everything to save him. Church, friends, M.D.'s, psychiatrists, family, pleading, hospitals, mental institutions. All are tried to no avail. As we read Campbell's words we sense a real powerlessness. The child convulses and we do not know what to do. This is a parable of our time. They were not able.

Jesus railed out at his impotent disciples: "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? Bring the boy to me." Jesus healed him. The disciples could not understand the convulsions or the demons or even the healing. They were not able. But Jesus had spoken the word of power: "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" He is able!

Later, toward nightfall when the crowds had scattered and they were alone, the disciples huddled around Jesus with their questions. "Why could we not cast it out?" Jesus' reply was so strange and simple that it is easily overlooked. "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." There is a powerlessness and an inability to do what needs to be done. But here we discover a new dimension: the power of God.

Jesus Christ himself, fresh from the mount of transfiguration, close to God, dazzled by the brilliance of the mystery, was able to effect a cure because he had been in the presence of the Almighty. There is a victory over the powers of evil, but it comes from God. Pentecost then is God's work.

If this be true, does it not mean that Pentecost addresses the powers both personal and corporate? The Early Church believed this. When they added the addendum "Thine is the power" to the prayer of our Lord they took in the whole wide world.

Mark's story says that Jesus is Lord. He is the power and the glory. There are some things that can only be accomplished through prayer. But we moderns in the church have forgotten this Pentecost word. We want some book to read, some program to follow, something more complicated than this business of prayer. The early church must have been one with us for later they added to Jesus words: "There are some things that can only be accomplished through prayer *and fasting* . . ." Nervous activists in every age like that addition which is not included in the original text. Our only weapon is to stay close to him, to demonstrate with our lives, our work, and in our churches the truth that the powers and the principalities really are the lesser gods.

John Howard Yoder⁴ says that our task as a church is to wrench ourselves away from the powers of this world. He says the church is to be a sign that the

unbroken dominion has come to an end. And Glenn Hinson underlines this point when he writes, accusingly: "Essentially history shows main-line churches, like people, will choose a life-style they can afford or would like to maintain."⁵

Hendrikus Berkhof says that our task is to hold the powers at a distance lest they seduce us; thus, he says ours is a defensive stance. Berkhof pulls out all the words that Paul uses in his defense against the powers and principalities of darkness. Those words include: girdle, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, sword (short sword). But Berkhof says there is no mention anywhere of offensive weaponry: lance, bow, spear, arrow.⁶ These are not named. Our task is not to attack the powers. But neither are we to be seduced by them. As Paul reminded us: we do have weapons, but they can never be carnal.

Barbara Tuchman says that the church in the Middle Ages offered little solace in that time of great powerlessness. "The great gap between Medieval Christianity's ruling principle and everyday life is the great pitfall of the Middle Ages."⁷ She continues: "The clergy on the whole were probably no more lecherous or greedy or untrustworthy than other men, but because they were supposed to be better or nearer God than other men, their failings attracted more attention."⁸ But here and there in that very dark time a light did shine. A hundred years before, Francis of Assisi had challenged the corruption and decadence of his own church. He refused to be seduced by the world. He insisted that the Christ, who had no place to lay his head, called his followers to life as their Lord. By 1350, the Franciscans had come to be institutionalized. Many talked of poverty and wore capes of ermine; but here and there we know that behind closed doors and secret places there gathered little clusters of those who refused to take their orders from the powers of the world. They were the ones who tediously copied the Scriptures and preserved what the generations before had given them. They collected books, sang songs, and prayed their prayers until a torch would be passed that would become the foundation of the reforms of the sixteenth century.

But what about our time and the powerlessness we feel and face on this Pentecost of 1986? What message is there embedded in the old text for our people and for us, too?

I have learned some things along the way about this powerlessness and about this power. Some time ago someone asked me to name some of the books that had influenced me during my first days of ministry. It was a journey down memory lane. I recalled Ernest Ligon's *The Psychology of the Christian Personality*, and *Dear Charles* by Wesley Schrader. In college I discovered a book by an Austin Baptist preacher I had never heard of, *Faith in Conflict*. Later, in my first church, there would be others: Findley Edge's *The Quest for Vitality in Religion*; *The Company of the Committed* by Elton Trueblood, and Robert Raines' *New Life in the Church*. But the book that hit me like a thunderbolt was Elizabeth O'Connor's *Call To Commitment*. Reading her words over and over again I tried to transpose the Church of the Savior to the 75-year-old rural Dawson Baptist Church in Philpot, Kentucky. It didn't work. The book I almost forgot was a book by Joseph McCabe entitled *The Power of God in the Parish Program*. I ignored the first part of the title, but clung to his ideas

about the parish program. I was young and needed help. I tried every trick, gimmick, and idea I could.

After three and a half years of frustration I moved on to greener pastures in Danville, Virginia. There I continued my tireless efforts to transpose a Washington inner-city house/church onto a semirural congregation in the middle of the most fertile tobacco land in the country. The parish program I had brought with me from Kentucky turned mostly into failure again. Through the convergence of my own father's death and problems in the church I served, coupled with my own empty workaholism, I found myself at the edge of the abyss—my own dark ages. Finally, only because I was desperate, I turned to an older physician in town to whom I had referred many others. He helped me enormously. One of the things he gave me was a little mimeographed card with the twenty-third Psalm inscribed on it. The words read: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not lack. . . ." My old friend went on to say that God never gives us what we want, but always what we need. We shall never lack the basic essentials. God always provides these. I clung to that bit of a verse like it was a life raft "The Lord is my Shepherd, I *shall not lack*. . . ." It was the beginning of a healing that continues to this day. I began, falteringly, to discover firsthand the power that I had been preaching for six years.

Some time later I moved on to Georgetown, Kentucky where a wounded healer and a wounded congregation helped bear one another's burdens. In the preface to a little book that I wrote there and dedicated to them six years later, I expressed the sentiment a second time: "After a long spiritual drought, a dark night that seemed to be interminably endless, joy came to me one afternoon. An old work was behind me and something new was just beginning. The moorings were not sure, and I was not certain that I was up to it; and then joy came. On a gorgeous spring afternoon as I was walking across a college campus, suddenly it was good to be alive. Life streamed in on me, and everything sparkled with a richness that I still remember vividly. The joy left me quickly as it came, and yet such occasions have kept me going."⁹ Again, I had come to terms with the power that is given.

In the middle of all this powerlessness, I keep bumping into this power in the strangest of places. Recently I was asked to preach at the seventy-fifth anniversary of my home church. This was the first time I had preached there in sixteen years. I was returning to the source, and I wanted to say something special.

That church sits right in the middle of a cotton mill village where I grew up. One day an idea hit me. I had my subject. During all my growing up years a picture hung in my home church, over the choir, back of the pulpit. The painting was a very good reproduction of Hans Hoffman's "Christ in Gethsemane." You know the scene—darkness all around, the city of Jerusalem silhouetted in the distance, the disciples sleeping some way off. In the center Jesus kneels in that garden with his face toward heaven. The only light comes from above and fills up the whole painting. What I wanted to say that morning was that all they did and I did was done while Jesus prayed in the garden. "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not." On that anniversary Sunday, standing there with my mother so proud and my brother so bored, I looked out

at a packed house—people made old by spinning frames and brown lung; people who had worked hard all their lives and known many convulsions. I could hardly keep back the tears. I knew deep in my heart that I had come full circle. I had come back to what I had left. I talked that morning about the painting, and of life which is overshadowed by that towering figure kneeling in the garden praying for us all.

We are all powerless. Those in the Middle Ages whispered as they buried their dead: “Surely this is the end of the world.”¹⁰ We are all powerless: those nine disciples, that convulsive child, the frantic father, Will Campbell and his doomed brother Joe; and perhaps especially a young, green pastor and his old congregation in Philpot and in Danville, and the wounded ones in Georgetown and in Clemson and all those weary cotton mill workers that cling together, Sunday after Sunday, under the picture of the kneeling Jesus. We are not able, and yet mystery of mysteries, he prays for us that our faith fail not.

As you stand on Pentecost Sunday to read the text for the day, celebrating once again the birthday of the church, remember that we cannot cast out evil, ever. We really are powerless. But remember more. He is able. His power is sure. Remember, like those good men and women in every age: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not us.” Thus, preach it and live it and believe it. Powerless, but power-filled. Those who believe this, they could change the world!

NOTES

¹ Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1978), p. xiii.

² *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-xiv.

³ Quoted in Rollo May, *Power and Innocence* (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 2.

⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 135-162.

⁵ Quoted in “The Alternative,” *Missions USA* (January-February, 1981), p. 60.

⁶ Yoder, p. 152.

⁷ Tuchman, p. xix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹ Roger Lovette, *Journey Toward Joy* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1977), p. 7.

¹⁰ Tuchman, pp. 94-95.