

Here's what hit me 5 – The love of POWER vs. the power of LOVE – Numbers 12, 16 – 2.14.2010

This week, I listened through the book of **Numbers**. Here's what hit me.

The book of **Numbers** contains a lot of numbers!!! It wouldn't surprise me if that's where they got the title. They say that every word of the Bible is equally true but not every word is equally important. Many of the chapters in **Numbers** aren't as important to us as, say, **Romans**. But they were very important to the Israelites. This is their book of accounting of what God has given them. From one man (Abraham) to twelve large tribes. That's what most of the numbers refer to – population. The book of Numbers also gives an account of their journey through the wilderness, stop by stop.

Yet **Numbers** isn't just numbers. Some of the great stories are here too. There is Joshua and Caleb wanting to take Canaan, but the people resisting because of the report of the ten faithless spies. There is Balaam and his talking donkey. There is a lot of complaining too, with the people saying that they are sick to death of manna and God giving them quail to eat, and then sending a plague on them at the same time, just for their complaining!

Here's what else hit me. When God pours out judgment in the Old Testament way, things happen that are almost too offensive to explain. In **Numbers 31**, when the Israelites win a military victory over the Midianites, the Israelites captured the women and children as captives. Now in our wars today, we are rightly concerned with treatment of prisoners and protection of civilians. So it is more than a little shocking to hear this in **Numbers 31:14-18 - Moses was angry with the officers of the army—the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds—who returned from the battle.** ¹⁵ "Have you allowed all the women to live?" he asked them. ¹⁶ "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the LORD's people. ¹⁷ Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, ¹⁸ but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man.

I can only say in response that the wages of sin is death and that all of us live and have our freedom by the grace of God. Remember all those times in the Old Testament when it says that God will visit his judgment on someone's children's children? He wasn't kidding, and the practices of these people showed that their cup of sin was full and their time had come. And yet in the larger context of the whole Bible, God shows that his love and mercy far exceeds our own, a fact we forget if we sit in judgment on his word from the past. And thankfully, we don't live in these days of Law but in the days of Jesus Christ, the days of grace, the days where the command is love your neighbor as yourself, love your wife as Christ loved the church and love your enemies.

But more than anything else, here's what hit me: People love power. Even more than money, we love power. This isn't always bad, but it is always a temptation toward what's bad.

How many of you would like your boss's job? Even if it came without a raise?

How many of you would like to work for yourself, assuming you could make a living at it, and even if it meant a little less money?

There's nothing wrong with those desires as such. We don't think of such things as examples of power-grabbing, but we DO call them "empowerment". If you get an education and get out of debt and save money, you empower yourself to make some choices rather than being stuck doing something you

hate just to pay your bills. But even those impulses which we regard as healthy can metastasize into: "No one tells me what to do." "I don't like to take orders from anyone!" People love power.

This is seen clearly in **Numbers 12** when Moses' own family gets jealous of his power, or of God's power flowing through Moses.

¹ **Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his [Cushite](#) wife, for he had married a Cushite.** This wasn't really about her, though. Sometimes when you resent someone's power, something else that irritates you presents itself as the starting point for complaining. The next verse makes clear what Miriam and Aaron, the sister and brother of Moses, really have on their minds.

² **"Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the LORD heard this.**

³ **(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)** Wait a minute. Who wrote Numbers? This might be a good time to point out that even though these first five books of the Bible are called the Books of Moses, that doesn't mean he wrote every word! Certainly he didn't write the part where, later on, he dies. Maybe he didn't write that line either!

Now this power struggle is a little surprising to me only because of the danger associated with dealing with God. Last week, Aaron's oldest sons, legitimate priests, offered strange fire, unauthorized fire to the Lord, and were instantly killed. Most of the people were content to stay out of the way and let Moses have the power, but when you are close to someone with power and especially when you all come from the same gene pool, you start to think: "Why not ME?"

⁴ **At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you." So the three of them came out.** ⁵ **Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward,** ⁶ **he said, "Listen to my words:**

**"When a prophet of the LORD is among you,
I reveal myself to him in visions,
I speak to him in dreams.**

⁷ **But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.**

⁸ **With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the LORD.
Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?"**

⁹ **The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.**

¹⁰ **When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow.** I'm not sure what the invitation hymn is today, but it would be a bad day to sing, "Whiter than snow, yes, whiter than snow, Lord wash me and I will be whiter than snow!" But this is serious and these aren't bad people, so... **Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had leprosy;** ¹¹ **and he said to Moses, "Please,**

my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. ¹² Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away."

¹³ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "O God, please heal her!"

¹⁴ The LORD replied to Moses, "If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back." ¹⁵ So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back.

¹⁶ After that, the people left Hazereth and encamped in the Desert of Paran.

If you did your out-of-class reading, I suggested **Numbers 16** as extra credit. I won't go over it in detail, but it covers a MAJOR grab for power called Korah's rebellion. 250 community leaders came up to Moses and Aaron and said: "**You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?**" These were knowledgeable men, leaders, and they should have known better. In fact, when Moses called them all out and told them to bring their censers to offer fire to the Lord and let the Lord choose his priests, they should have backed down. But sometimes in our lust for there is more than we can see at work. There is an evil one whispering in our ears, lying to us, telling us, "Has God really said?" (I'm not talking about your wife or your assistant manager here). It doesn't say so in so many words, but I've got to believe that these guys were led astray by the evil one and the result was that they all perished in flames, and almost 15,000 died in a plague of God's judgment.

People love power, and we are susceptible to the lie of the serpent who told Eve, "God isn't being honest with you. He knows that if you eat this fruit, you'll be wise like Him, and that would be bad for Him but good for you". Today he tells us: "You're smarter than your teacher. Why listen to him? Your parents are just on a power kick. It's time for you to exert some power. Your boss is out-of touch, and you'd be doing everyone a favor if you would start to take control. Your wife doesn't know what she is talking about. Tell her to shut up. Your husband is, after all, a man. Put him in his place!"

In the 1980s, evangelical Christians began to gain interest in political power. That's understandable. We have some responsibility for what happens in this country. But having Senators and Presidents respond to your voice funneled through a Christian lobbying group is intoxicating, and these days I hear so much power talk among Christians and not very much talk that reflects the ethics of Jesus, of the Beatitudes, of the Sermon on the Mount, of Calvary.

In the content of the book of **Numbers**, what hit me was the love of power. But what hit me by its absence from **Numbers** is another kind of power, the power of love. Now the book of **Numbers** is our history and it teaches us about the holiness of our God. But if we ever decided that the book of **Numbers** was our marching orders, we might think it our duty to go smite God's enemies. But we are under a different dispensation, and we are brokers of a different kind of power...the power of love.

1 Corinthians 13 - ¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal (that's "tinkling cymbal" in KJV). ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

That means that I can be right about abortion and gay marriage and euthanasia, but without love, it's worthless. And I can be in good standing with the Green Police and right about poverty and right about helping Haiti, but without love, I am nothing. I can listen to Christian radio and read all the Christian stuff in my inbox and I can join the group **"Let's find 6 billion Christians on Facebook and make Jesus more popular than Justin Bieber"** but if I have not love, I am a tinkling cymbal.

In one sense, love means that I surrender my will to power. But the bigger picture is that when I choose to love with the love of the Lord, I unleash the power of God that is greater than any force in creation.

The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell...*

Jesus said in **Matthew 5** - ⁴³**"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'** ⁴⁴**But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** ⁴⁵**that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.**

Paul said in **Romans 12** - ¹⁷**Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.** ¹⁸**If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.** ¹⁹**Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"** says the Lord. ²⁰**On the contrary:**

**"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."**

Are those burning coals something nice or something painful? Some say it's a blessing. He has a bucket on his head and he is collecting coals to take home and make his own fire and you give him some of yours. Others say, no, it means that by being kind to your enemy, you make him ashamed of the way he has treated you. I think the second one is true, but there is no missing the lesson:

²¹**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

To choose love when power makes more worldly sense, especially the power of violence and revenge...this is a great act of faith. It goes against everything Jack Bauer ever taught me on 24 to believe that there is a power in love that is greater than power itself.

In my Love Path devotion for last Sunday, I told about a guy from Rwanda who fled that country during the genocide in 1994, and when he returned to the uneasy peace sometime later, he learned that his next door neighbors had hired bodyguards, thugs, and told them to go ahead and beat this man and his family if they got the chance, no reason needed. So one day he was out in the yard with his child and the neighbor boy from this same hostile family threw a rock and barely missed hitting the child in the head. So this Christian man flew off the handle and shouted words of rage, hateful words. Who wouldn't have?

But later that night, the Lord convicted him in his spirit that this was a sin. LOVE your enemies, Jesus says. Overcome evil with good. So the next morning he marched right up to their door and knocked, and when the adults answered he apologized for his hateful speech to their son.

They were so blown away! Their son had thrown a rock, with their implied approval. And now this man was owning and apologizing for words he had spoken! Everyone knows that the power is in the ROCK. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me, and words won't heal me either, right? No, it isn't right. His words shattered walls and suddenly two families who were living in fear of each other became neighbors and protectors of one another, because evil really can be overcome with good, and love really can turn enemies into friends, but it takes faith in an all-powerful, all just, and all loving God to do it his way.

And this, of course, is how God loved us: **⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:7-8).**

We talk as if our enemies were out there – environmentalists, fundamentalists, vegetarians! We will give an account for careless words and we need to love these folks, but in truth, the power of love needs to shine brightest among those we live with, those we work with. It's your spouse who needs to hear that apology; it's with your brother that you have to refuse to retaliate and leave it in God's hands; it's your parents who need to see loving attitude and service, kids, even more than the folks at the rescue mission or the Lakota reservation (who need to see it too).

The point is that there is power in love when it's the love of God we're talking about...

The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star,
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

That's a love that can save you, change you, heal you and those around you.

Prayer, Invitation

*The Love of God
Words and music by Frederick Lehman
Arranged by his daughter, Claudia L. Mays – 1919

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