

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
Sermon for January 28, 2018

I want to talk a little bit about power. It's a strange word isn't it. In its worst sense, power means domination. I'm sure we can think of any number of instances where that is true. I'm thinking about the scandals in the news recently where powerful men have been accused of using their influence and position to attack and then silence subordinates. I'm also thinking of the posturing and sabre rattling of governments bragging about the size of their respective missile stockpiles, the strength of their armies, or accuracy of their drones. These examples reinforce power's connection to violence, to domination, to evil.

No wonder we have a hard time talking about it. We're Episcopalians. We're from the upper Midwest. If your upbringing was anything like mine, power wasn't something to crave. Power-hungry. Drunk on power. I understood power to be a bad word. Maybe you did as well.

What if power isn't bad? What if it is like money or leverage—something neutral in and of itself? Powerful people can organize their money and their constituents to mobilize toward a particular end. Imagine any number of natural disasters in the last twenty years. There is always a picture on the front page of National Guard soldiers reinforcing levies or sand bagging vulnerable parts of a coastal town. A president or a governor mobilized people for a particular result. Put another way, someone exercised power so that lives and property might be saved.

So, power, as far as I can tell, is neutral—possible to be used for great good or great harm.

I happen to think that St. Mark's is a powerful place. Did you see what we did with the diaper drive? We brought together dozens of people, hundreds of dollars, and literally thousands of diapers. And this is all from a church that just breaks a hundred people on Sunday mornings. Did you see what the Confirmation kids did the other day? They got together and worked hard to make blankets and friendly cards for people in the hospital. 10 teenagers organized a little bit of money to make impact in this lives of this parish. Power, it turns out, can be a marvelous tool for a Christian.

What do you suppose we should do with all our power? If we don't use it, I guarantee it will fade. The iron is hot, as they say.

As always, we take our instruction from Jesus.

In today's Gospel, Jesus spends the sabbath at the synagogue in the city of Capernum. He's teaching the people there, and the narrator says that Jesus has an authority that the usual teachers don't have. There's something special about this guy. While he is in the middle of his lesson, someone possessed by an unclean spirit walks in, recognizes the power in Jesus and begins to

question him. Jesus commands the spirit to be silent and to release the afflicted man. And it happened. The spirit left, and the man was healed.

What if I told you that what Jesus did to that unclean spirit demonstrated the same kind of power that we have in the church. We are the followers of a guy who casts out demons, and he taught his disciples, who taught their disciples, and so on and so forth down to us. We are the heirs of Jesus, and I suggest that we have some spirits in our world that need to be commanded.

I tell the Vestry regularly that we can do just about anything we put our mind to, and I believe it. Thankfully, I don't think there are too many unclean spirits in our parish that need to be cast out, unless you count all the broken lights in our very scary basement. But, there ARE spirits in this city that need to be named and cast out. Even some that are really big and scary. Hunger is a spirit that lives in our city. Poverty is a spirit that lives in our city. Racism is a spirit that lives in our city. Loneliness is a spirit as is depression. The list is long.

I know it's scary. What can little St. Mark's do in the face of such enormous demons. Sometimes that problems out in the world or the problems in our own lives can seem far too overwhelming. Sometimes we can feel powerless. But a Christian is never powerless, even if it can feel that way. We can use our power to create change. It might be small, but it's worth doing. After all, avalanches start small.

Imagine if every person of faith in our entire city really believed that, working together, we could cast out the unclean spirits in our neighborhood. Can you imagine that kind of power? What if every person of faith in this city brought a candle, a prayer, and a can of food to a city park at a certain time on a certain day. We could fill every food pantry in the city in an hour. Imagine if every Christian in the city decided to visit one person on their street that they knew were lonely. How many visits would that be? I didn't do the math, but I can guarantee it would make a dent in the isolation so prevalent in our city. The church is powerful, and I'm kind of tired of hearing that we are in decline or irrelevant. That's not what I see seated before me this morning. I see the heirs of Jesus who are powerful.

So, my brothers and sisters in Christ, if you did not know you were powerful before this morning, I hope that you know it now. We sit in these pews, shoulder to shoulder. That is power. We just must pray that we exercise our power in the way of our saviour Jesus—with compassion for the poor, with reverence for creation, with a constant suspicion of the unclean spirits in our midst. Those spirits must get out. They are unwelcome here, and we have the power to make it happen. Be wise. Be powerful. Be like Jesus, from whom all our power ultimately comes. Amen.