

"The Waters of Power"
by Vince Amlin
John 13:3-14
September 4, 2011

When I asked the folks, like Lea and Allison, who brought Waters of Power to our Gathering of Waters service, why they chose that category for their contributions, I got amazing stories back, both about the mighty sources of their water and about the strength of those who brought it back to us. We have water representing the awesome inevitability of slow-moving glaciers, representing the power of pioneers, pushing west and finding new waterways, and new ways of life; we have water that ran through dams, powering cities, and water that flowed under the tracks of charging locomotives; the power of the South African people is distilled into a few of these ounces as are the rejuvenating power of cooler northern weather and family by the backyard pool. There is awesome power contained in our water, and as I read these stories this week, I thought, this would have been perfect if I had stuck with my first scripture! A month ago I had chosen the story of Elisha the prophet, sought out for an oracle during a drought, falling into a trance, and foretelling powerful waters, welling up from below, filling every river and lake, rushing across the face of the cracked, parched earth, a prophecy of resurrection. That would have been a powerful water sermon. But a couple weeks ago, as sometimes happens when I'm thinking too much about my sermons, I had a dream, and I woke up with the image of foot washing as waters of power, and I knew I had to go with it. In a week in which we have been reminded again and again of the awesome and terrible power of water named Irene, and Lee, and Katie, I have been left holding this inert basin, I've been left to wonder about the power of such water. What is the strength in such weak water? Where is the power in a story of washing feet?

I thought of a church where I worked in Chicago, a Mennonite congregation in Rogers Park, the furthest northern neighborhood before one leaves the city for Evanston. The congregation had migrated down from the sleepy suburb, which houses Northwestern University, in hopes of having a positive impact on this much rougher neighborhood. They shared space in another congregation's building until a drive-by shooting down the street left a dry-cleaning shop vacant. After praying for the victims and the neighborhood for weeks, they decided the thing to do was to move in. When Rachelle and I took an apartment across the street some 10 or 15 years later, things had calmed down some. Still, one afternoon, when the high school down the street let out, I heard a noise and looked up from my theological reading to see a car pull up and pop its trunk and three students grab baseball bats and run after another boy. It was the only neighborhood I've lived in where I didn't always feel safe, yet what sticks out in my memory as the most difficult moments from that time, are the weekly potluck dinners.

Every Wednesday since it opened its doors, the congregation celebrated an evening potluck, a chance to get together, share food, and check in on one another's weeks. It was not the extravagant after worship potluck I grew up with in the Midwest, where there is enough food to feed ten times the number of people present. It was the simple, spare potluck of those who meet each week and are far from worried about impressing one another. People often brought leftovers from their fridge or from the restaurant they had gone to the night before. There were always more salads than main

dishes, and rarely much meat, but still always plenty for a simple meal. At least, that's what we had heard. A few months before Rachele and I came to be part of the community, whether by invite or intuition, word had gotten around to the neighborhood kids that there was a weekly meal at the strange church on the corner. It had started with a manageable number of kids, easily welcomed and corralled by the 20 or so adults in attendance. But by the time I came to intern, there were more visitors than members- about 30 neighborhood children from ages 5 to 18, descending upon the tiny meal each week.

There was never enough food. Many of the congregants did try to provide greater quantities and more substantive fare, but anything recognizable to the kids disappeared within the first ten guests, and most weeks I had to walk to the pizza place down the street and buy as many pies as they had ready. Still, the lack of food was not the difficult part; all of us had well-stocked refrigerators to which we would soon return, and no one begrudged these hungry kids a decent meal. In fact, as you can imagine, the church was glad to have some in road into the lives of these kids whom we knew were already being recruited by the gangs whose violence had brought the congregation to that corner. The real difficulty, at least for me, the place where I learned the most about the strength of weakness, was when we got to the tables.

Being good hosts and responsible and caring adults, the members of the congregation spread themselves out to tables full of kids, and tried to start conversation. They introduced themselves and asked the kids their names. The kindest response they got was simply to be ignored, treated as if they were not there and had not spoken. This was difficult enough to watch, but other times, as one of the church members was about to sit down, one of the kids would shout, "oh no, here she comes," and the entire group would move to another table. When everyone was seated, the church members earnestly persisted in trying to start conversation, being as friendly as possible, joining in on whatever the kids were talking about. They were mocked, made fun of, or told to "shut up." If you have never seen someone refuse to react in anger when treated with derision and spite for no reason at all, it is difficult to understand the intense discomfort and awkward pain of those Wednesday night meals. Returning good for evil or killing people with kindness have become catch phrases about the honorable and powerful thing to do in the face of a bully, but if you have ever really witnessed someone returning kindness for bald cruelty, you know it does not look honorable or powerful. It looks pathetic and embarrassing. Sitting at those tables, I was embarrassed for these men and women, humiliated for them. But I also knew that they were much more powerful than I was. After the first day, I did not even have the power to venture a question or a greeting, and as often as I could, I sat at one of the tables where a few of the church members had been abandoned. I marveled that no one raised their voices, or demanded the insolent brats hit the road, or at least stole back a chicken leg. That's that I would have done. But I was witnessing a different kind of power.

It's that kind of power, which I believe is found in the small basin of water beside which Jesus kneels to wash his disciples' feet. His is another bold act of vulnerability. It is no accident that the story of the foot washing is bound up with the story of Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. It is in the knowledge of these treacheries that Jesus gets out his towel. But more than that, he performs this service in a society which is, if not more stratified than our own, at least more straightforwardly stratified. There are clear

rules and boundaries for behavior, which are not to be transgressed. Those in charge are unquestionably in charge. Might makes right, and the forceful exercise of power is expected and rewarded. Jesus' act turns that way of being on its head. He may not be the most powerful person in the society; he is only a peasant, but to his disciples he is teacher and Lord, someone to be revered above all others. In that circle he has true power, and the upsetting impact of Jesus' actions are made clear in Peter's reactions, "Are you going to wash my feet?...You will never wash my feet!" Peter has a visceral reaction, something like what I felt sitting at those dinner tables. To serve when one could command is, in Peter's mind, to degrade oneself. And though it may be difficult for a modern democratic audience to understand, Jesus' actions take great power, a power Peter cannot fathom; a power no different than being insulted to your face and doing nothing in return, no different than standing before a tank, no different from the unilateral disarmament of being the first one to say, "I'm sorry."

Where does such power come from? How are some able to choose weakness in the face of strength, to choose vulnerability in the face of violence, to choose service in the face of power? For Jesus and for the Mennonites, that power comes from God. John begins his story of the foot washing with this sentence which is almost a throw away, Jesus, knowing "that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself." It is not Jesus' own power that inspires him to serve, rather it is his acknowledgement of a greater power that focuses him for the task at hand. Peter, wrapped up in Jesus' significance, cannot fathom this act of servitude, but Jesus, knowing his own insignificance, knowing that he was only a drop in the basin, could take up his cloth. I believe this story is telling us that when we release our own senses of importance, our significance, our strength, we can find the power to do things we are not actually strong enough to do.

The Buddhist writer, John Tarrant, in his book *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*, writes about one of his characters in this way, "At that moment, in the wind and the vast land, he was small and unimportant, and this sense of his unimportance allowed him to be clear about what needed to be done. Being important seeded to him to be just a prejudice that confined him."¹ When we live our lives in the acknowledgment of something greater, of something vaster, of something more important, we are freed to do amazing things. The activist and organic farmer, Art Gish, wrote about an experience of the power of powerlessness in his essay, "What if I had punched him back?" Gish writes, "During the Vietnam War, as I was distributing anti-war leaflets at a high school, I was accosted by a twenty year-old man. He cussed me out, then punched me in the face. What should I have done? Since he was bigger than I was, there was no point in me punching him back. That could have been a disaster for me. I did remain nonviolent. Immediately after punching me, he broke down into tears; he told me that he was scheduled to leave for Vietnam the next week, and he definitely did not want to go. A long intense conversation followed between the two of us. What if I had been bigger than he, and I had punched him back? What would I have accomplished? I would have proved that I was bigger than he, which I would have already known. By being

¹ Tarrant, John. *Bring Me the Rhinoceros: and Other Zen Koans*. Harmony Books. New York, NY. 2004. p. 24

nonviolent, by expressing openness and acceptance, I allowed the possibility of a breakthrough, of communication, and of new possibilities.”²

I did see a few new possibilities arise from those dreaded Wednesday night potlucks. At my first potluck I sat with a young man I’ll call Andre. Until that dinner I had never seen anyone look straight at a person and then ignore them. We first learned Andre’s name after one such stare down, when one of the younger kids at the table took pity on the elderly woman who was trying to introduce herself to him and said, “his name’s Andre.” For the rest of the meal, as I sat in dumbfounded silence, wondering how long this summer internship would be, the woman’s questions to Andre never elicited more than a grunt. But she kept at it. Week after week Andre returned, and week after week one or the other of the church members would sit down beside him and try to engage him. He gradually moved from silent stares, to grunts, to rude words, and slowly, very slowly toward cautious conversation.

One week Andre and a few other kids were hanging around outside the church door over an hour before dinner time. One of the church members was carrying groceries and invited the kids in to help cook. A few of them took her up on it, including Andre, and a new weekly routine was born. In the kitchen, Andre’s creativity, and humor, and smile came out. He cooked and baked whatever was on hand, and talked about the cooking he and his mom did at home. He was no gourmet, but the kids were all happy to eat whatever Andre made, and he was proud to serve it. One of the last weeks of my internship, Andre was celebrating his birthday, and he asked the woman who brought the groceries to get the materials for him to make a cake, nothing elaborate, just a box mix and pre-made frosting, but he treated it as if it were someone’s wedding cake. When he brought it into the dining room, one of the church members dimmed the lights, and the entire group sang happy birthday. And it was beautiful. I’d like to say that event suddenly made Wednesday nights tolerable, but before the lights were even on, chaos ensued as kids clamored for a piece of Andre’s cake. Still, in the moment he carried that cake out, I know something powerful happened in that room.

What if the church members hadn’t opened their doors? What if the elderly woman beside me hadn’t risked asking Andre’s name? What if they had not been willing to put themselves out there week after week, to accept the hurtful words of those hurting kids? What if, like me, they had considered themselves too important to be insulted? What if they had considered themselves too powerful to be ignored? What if they had believed their precious Wednesday night meals, too significant to their community to be interrupted? It was well within their power. Instead they chose weakness, they chose unimportance, they chose insignificance, and the real power flowed.

² Gish, Art. “What if I had Punched Him Back?” in *What Would You Do?* John Yoder, ed. Herald Press. Scottdale, PA. 1983., pp. 135-136