

THE TROUBLE WITH GETTING AHEAD

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January 27, 2013

You have heard perhaps the story of the three men on the first tee preparing to start a round of golf lamenting that they did not have a fourth to join them when all of a sudden a 2000-pound gorilla walks out of the clubhouse with a bag of clubs on his back and motions to the men that he would like to play with them. The men look at each other and politely invite the gorilla to join them. So they pick up teams and of course each of the men is reluctant to take the gorilla onto his team, but finally one man agrees. So they all tee off on this opening par five and the gorilla hits the ball 315 yards straight down the fairway. The men are impressed and the gentleman who has picked him to be on his team is rather encouraged. The men all get to their next shots and the gorilla gets to his ball and pulls out a three wood and hits the ball this time 275 yards straight as an arrow and the ball goes rolling up onto the green five feet from the hole. The man now is very encouraged and on the way up the green asks if his opponents want to double the stakes. Which they agree to do. And with that the gorilla pulls out his putter and lines up his putt and hits it 295 yards.

Power can be an awesome thing ... and it can be a terrible thing. Depending, of course, on how it is applied.

Norman Maclean in his wonderful family tale, *A River Runs Through It*, tells of growing up with his brother in Montana, learning from their father how to fly fish. Their father was a Presbyterian minister and a master at fly fishing, and to their father, fly fishing was a theological exercise. Their father believed that humanity by nature was a mess and had fallen from its original state of grace and “that only by picking up God’s rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty.” Maclean goes on to explain that casting a fly is an exercise of rhythm and power. “Until man is redeemed,” he writes, “he will always take a fly rod too far back, just as natural man always overswings an ax or golf club and loses all his power somewhere in the air... Power comes,” Maclean continues, “not from power everywhere, but from knowing where to put it on.”

Power comes not from power everywhere, but from knowing where to put it on. Power is awesome or terrible, depending on how it is applied.

Last Monday many of us watched as our country's leaders participated in that great quadrennial ceremony of the orderly and peaceful transfer and affirmation of power. We inaugurate a President with great pomp and ceremony to celebrate the great principles of democracy and to acknowledge the will of the people. Senators and representatives and Cabinet secretaries and judges all assemble and a Bible is presented and a hand is placed and an oath is made ... and power is confirmed. But what to do with the power? This is the question. Power comes not from power everywhere, but from knowing where to put it on.

Our lives are pageants of power every day. Power in the corporate office. Power in the market place. Power in the halls of government. Power in our socio-economic status. Power in the group of friends you hang around with in school. Power on the playing field. Power in the car we drive. How much power do you have, and how much power do you wish to attain?

It explains then, doesn't it, that all the business books in the book store usually lead with some variation on the question, "Do you have the power to get ahead?" It's usually the issue when you get talking about power – do you have the power to get ahead ... and do you have the power to stay ahead? That's what we often think of when we think of power – the power to get ahead. Just last night, I was at the bookstore and picked up a book called, *The 48 Laws of Power*. Included in these laws were these: Never put too much trust in friends—learn how to use enemies; Do not commit to anyone; Crush your enemy totally; Discover each man's thumbscrew. It's all about getting ahead.

So the truth is, what we want to get ahead of is other people. We don't like to think of it that way but that's what it boils down to. When you are trying to get ahead you are trying to get ahead of people. When you are trying to stay ahead you are trying to stay ahead of people. Now the trouble with getting ahead and staying ahead of other people is that it distorts our understanding of what power really is and what we should do with our power.

I used to run track and one thing our track coach used to always tell us is that when you get ahead, you don't ever do *what?* You don't ever look back. When you look back you slow down. You lose ground. You lose your power. So the best way to stay ahead is to forget about the people behind you. Exert your power in going forward not looking backward.

So it may come as a big surprise when in Luke's Gospel Jesus walks onto the platform and delivers what Biblical scholars say is his inaugural speech – his first sermon – his mission statement – it may come as a big surprise that when God's Messiah, having received the blessing of the Spirit of the Lord – the transfer of power, reaches for the scroll of Isaiah and opens it to chapter 61 – and reads the following: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” The Messiah in his assumption of power, in his claiming of the Spirit of God, sees it as his mission not to get ahead – but to strangely get behind. That the power of God is not the power to get ahead, it is the power to get behind. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and he has given me power not to get ahead of people, but to get behind them. To get behind the poor, to get behind the captives, to get behind the blind, to get behind the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Now the year of the Lord's favor is Jesus reference to the Old Testament yearning of God for a year of Jubilee. God tells his people in Leviticus chapter 25 that he is instituting for them perhaps the most radical legal and constitutional stipulations known in the history of law. God declares to his people that every 50th year is to be a year of Jubilee. And the year of Jubilee was in essence to be a year when the people of God got a reset. The year of Jubilee was the year when slaves and their families were freed from their owners and given the chance to start over. It was also the year when debts were to be cancelled and when property was to be returned to its original owners. Everybody, in the year of Jubilee, got the chance to go back to square one. Kind of like putting the Monopoly pieces back in the box and starting a new game. The year of Jubilee, the year of God's favor, was a 50 year reset so that the people of God would remember where it all came from – and – to keep people from getting too far ahead of each other. The year of Jubilee was a way of getting the people of God to get behind the poor and the captives and the oppressed and the blind. To give them and their families another chance. It was taking the power that we instinctively use to get ahead, and to apply it to getting behind.

It was a law, interestingly enough, that the people of Israel never instituted. Never enacted. It was on their books but it never got into their hearts. So it is interesting that when the Messiah steps to the platform and takes his oath of office that he tells the people that it is the Spirit's mandate to proclaim the year of jubilee. Not as codified law – but as the movement of the Spirit. That it is the movement of the spirit not to get us ahead, but to get us behind.

It explains doesn't it that even though Jesus teaches his disciples over and over again about how the first shall be last and the last shall be first and that the greatest among will be the one most willing to stoop the lowest – the disciples still spend their time arguing over who is going to the greatest and who is going to sit at his right hand — it is not until the Spirit comes on Pentecost, it is not until the Spirit moves that the disciples start caring less about getting ahead and caring more about getting behind.

So they got behind lame men and helped them walk. They got behind possessed women and set them free. They got behind hungry people and gave them something to eat. They got behind Gentiles and Samaritans and lepers and slaves and welcomed them into the kingdom. They got behind centurions and generals and emperors and opened their eyes to the good news of grace. And it wasn't them, of course. No, it was the Holy Spirit who filled them and gave them the power to go against the grain, to go against the grain of trying to get ahead and instead turned them the other way to help them embrace the life of getting behind.

The life of getting behind.

It's what we promise when we take on the mission of equipping disciples for the service of Christ – that we will get behind our neighbor near and far to help them see the good news of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. It's what we try to live when we get commissioned to Honduras or partner with our mission friends underneath that tent – that it is always time for a reset ... it is always time to put the pieces back in the box and start over.

I suppose it is what motivated a Georgia lawyer to wonder about the house he lived in. He lived in a nice house. It put him ahead of a good many people, it put him ahead of 95% of the world, and it put him behind not many others. But one night as he laid in bed the thought occurred to him – prompted by a Bible study he was in – he said to himself, “Everyone who gets sleepy at night should have a decent place to lay their heads, on terms they can afford to play.”

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It was that thought that got him looking over his shoulder at all those people he had managed to get ahead of. So he factored it out that the most space a human being needs to live in is around 500 square feet. A family of four – 2000 square feet. A family of six – 3000 square feet. All the rest is just getting more ahead than you need to. And so he wondered, what if we got behind the people who were having trouble finding a decent place to lay their heads? What if we got behind families that couldn't afford a small mortgage? What if we got behind children who sleep in the woods in Sarasota? What if we got behind folks who lost their jobs and can't find another one? What if we got behind people whose health renders them unable? What if we proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor? The kingdom of jubilee? What if we put some of the pieces back in the box and gave some folks another chance? What if we took the power and applied it not on getting ahead but on getting behind?

And all that was the start of Habitat for Humanity. Millard Fuller's vision that all world be housed. That everyone who gets sleepy at night should have a decent place to lay their heads, on terms they can afford to play. And he invited us to the power of the Spirit. People taking the power and applying it in the places where God would have it be. Returning to the rhythms of grace and beauty. Swinging hammers instead of golf clubs. Welding metal instead of wielding influence. He called it a "theology of enough".

Albert Schweitzer said it a little differently. Albert Schweitzer, the great renaissance man of the 19th century who gave up the great universities and concert halls of Europe in order to establish a mission in the heart of Africa, put it this simply, "Do something for someone every day for which you do not get paid." Do you have the time to do that? Probably not. Do you have the inclination to do that? Probably not. Do you have even the interest to do that? Probably not. "But there is a power," Jesus says, "there is a power that will come upon you ... the power of the Holy Spirit ... that compels us to preach good news to the poor, to recover sight for the blind, to free the captives and to establish jubilee. The power to get behind. The power to do something for someone every day for which you do not get paid. There is a power at work within us who is able to accomplish abundantly far more that we could ever ask or imagine.

And it is this power, this power to get behind that gives us the joy that we've always wanted; the joy that comes in being a person, a real person, a God-created and directed person whose life is all about – *getting behind*.