

## THE PERILS OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

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From time to time I receive a questionnaire that asks, “Do you think the country is headed on the right direction?” Of late my answer has been, “No.” If someone were to ask me whether I think the United Methodist Church is heading in the right direction, I would again say, “No.” It just seems to me, in both cases, that too many ‘little people’ are getting hurt, that too many of those who are ‘out of the main stream’ are being targeted, excluded, and abused. From my perspective that just can’t be good, healthy, or moral.

Part of the problem, I think, is that too many folks, individuals, groups, officials, have fallen prey to the perils of power and authority. The late Bishop Rueben Job observed: “The power of wealth, position, big cars, big houses, and the connection to the right places and right persons makes up much of that which passes for news in culture.” That, “We do live in a world obsessed with power that is often destructive to all that is good, right, and true” That, “Power is not evil in and of itself. Power used wisely [he says] for good, noble, and holy purposes is a magnificent gift to the individual and to the church.” Exactly!

A nation has the power, and perhaps the authority, to exclude people. But should it? If doing so is destructive to all that is good, right, and true? The United Methodist General Conference had the power, and perhaps the authority, to take the action it did against LGBTQ persons and those who genuinely care for them. But should it have? When doing so has hurt so many faithful people? What good, noble, and holy purpose was served? The perils of power and authority confront us when we resort to brute power, hasty decisions, and imagined authority. When he finished the Sermon on the Mount, it was said of Jesus: “...the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” Indeed!

What good is power when it is uncharitable, abusive and destructive? What good is power when the harm it can do can last for generations? What good is power when it lacks moral clarity and transparency? What good is authority when it is used to belittle and destroy? What good is authority when it prevents discernment and alienates the very people who could work together for the common good? What good is authority when it lacks the vision to see and do the compassionate work of God?

Just because a person, or a community, or a nation has the power or even the authority to take an action, that is never sufficient rationale to do so. There is always the matter of the greater good and the long-term effects. Often the greatest measure of power and authority is the capacity to refrain from its use. And, the larger test is whether it is moral, or just, or even necessary. The prophet Micah asserted: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” For Jesus the test was whether the hungry received something to eat, whether the thirsty received something to drink, whether the naked received clothing, whether the sick were cared for, whether the prisoner received a visitor. Those who wield power and authority will be measured by how they meet these standards. Beware the perils of power and authority!