

Turning Over Tables

A Lenten Call for Disrupting Power

Kathy Escobar

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

“Kathy Escobar is a fearless, joyful soul guide for weary humans living in both stories and systems where power structures press in. *Turning Over Tables* reminds us with clarity and conviction that our personal transformation is tied to our collective liberation and that faith should and can be a catalyst for both. The path to individual and shared renovation is perilous, but Escobar shows us why the beauty we might experience is so worth the grieving and the growing necessary to reveal it.”

—John Pavlovitz, author of *Worth Fighting For*
and *If God Is Love, Don't Be a Jerk*

“Escobar is a consistent voice of humility, honesty, and hope. Prophetic, timely, and wise, this book will challenge you in all the best ways and lead to transformation.”

—Sarah Bessey, author of *A Rhythm of Prayer*
and *Field Notes for the Wilderness*

“We Christians often refer to God as ‘the Almighty,’ and sadly, we often make ourselves in that image, acting as if power (for our ego, our gender, our denomination, our party, or our nation) is something to be grasped, amassed, and hoarded. That’s why I’m so grateful that Kathy Escobar invites us to devote the season of Lent to a time of reflection on power. Get ready though . . . because this well-written book is powerful enough to challenge your assumptions about power!”

—Brian D. McLaren, author of *Life after Doom*

“Many Christians know the image of a gentle and peaceful Jesus, but few have truly encountered the Jesus who boldly challenged systems of power, flipped tables, and demanded justice for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. In this compelling and deeply pastoral devotional, Kathy Escobar invites us to walk alongside this radical Jesus—the one who not only taught but embodied the vision of a more just and equal world. This resource is both inspiring and challenging, offering Christians a transformative guide to aligning their lives with the way of Jesus, especially on the Lenten journey.”

—Brandan Robertson, author of *Queer
& Christian* and *Filled to Be Emptied*

Access free digital resources, which include a sermon series guide, videos for group study from the author, images for use during worship or group study, and resources to promote your outreach, at www.wjkbooks.com/TurningOverTables.

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Introduction

ENTER

“Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

—Matthew 7:13–14

Many years ago, I worked at a megachurch as an adult ministry pastor and had an experience some of you might be able to relate to personally, or perhaps you’ve seen it happen to others. While I loved my job and being in the trenches with people cultivating opportunities for transformation in community, I quickly realized the system I was serving was extremely unhealthy. Women in leadership were less-than, scapegoating people was normal, pretty and financially resourced people were clearly valued the most, and a focus on being the biggest and best church around was the driving force for all decisions.

My awakening felt like what happened in the apostle Paul’s conversion and healing from blindness: “And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength” (Acts 9:18–19).

When my eyes were finally opened to the overt and covert realities of unhealthy power in a system built on the name of Jesus, something shifted in the deepest part of my soul and experience. It was not a clean and easy transition. It was brutal, painful, and disorienting. When I began calling out unhealthy power, showing

up at elder meetings and asking them to consider their power and to use it on behalf of the least and the last, they shifted in their seats a little and patted me on the head, chalking up my comments to naiveté because they were all older, wiser, and more seasoned. Then, as I got increasingly vocal and stronger and rocked the boat more openly, I quickly found myself out of leadership, out of the church, and out of all I once had given my whole heart to. I didn't just lose my job in the process; I also lost a big part of who I was as a Christian.

Initially, it was one of the worst things that ever happened to me. Now I consider it a gift. Seeing the cycle of misused power in the name of God up close and personal helped me come back to why I started following Jesus in the first place—his wild and countercultural ways of disrupting existing power structures and caring for the most marginalized in society.

Almost every single Jesus story—from his birth to death to resurrection—reveals an inversion of the world's understanding of power. He touched lepers and dined with sinners. He turned over tables and called out religiosity on its hypocrisy. He told everybody that they needed to be last, not first. He said that love transcended all, that the way toward God was not up but down to the places of real life, real pain, and that God desired mercy, not sacrifice.

When my “sight was restored” and my eyes were opened to the ravages of unhealthy power, my heart was emboldened with hope for a better way. I was baptized into a new season of life, emerging far more passionate about disrupting toxic power; cultivating equity, activism, and systems change; and embodying the wild ways of Jesus collectively. For the past two decades since then, I have been working alongside people on the margins of life and faith and continue to see how power dynamics are at play in almost every system and circumstance. How we feel about ourselves in relationship to others, how we treat people different from us, who gets to lead and make decisions, who influences systems that affect us, and what impacts are felt from being on the underside of unhealthy power and oppressive systems are always running in a strong undercurrent in our groups, systems, and society.

However, I've continued to find that in most social circles power isn't the most popular topic. Why is it so hard to talk about? I think it's because power can feel invisible to us even though it is tied to almost every aspect of our lives. Especially for white, privileged, and resourced people of faith like me—and maybe like you—power is not something we readily notice. It's a lot like an iceberg—we see only its tip, but a massive mass exists underneath. Jim Henderson, a writer, speaker, and faith-conversation pot stirrer, once shared these simple words at a conference that I'll never forget: "People with power never think about it, and people without power think about it all of the time."¹

But what is power, really? And why is it so important to engage with as people of faith? Most definitions of power include something along the lines of the ability to control or have influence over others. In its simplest form, I think power is the ability to influence and catalyze through position, value, voice, and resources.

The ability to influence and catalyze through position, value, voice, and resources.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that "Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, or economic changes."² Dr. Cedar Barstow, founder of the Right Use of Power Institute, defines power as "the ability to have an effect or have influence."³ Jesus never specifically defined power, but he used stories and embodiment to flesh out a totally contradictory form of power than the traditional system.

Power is always at play as one of the most core realities in all social systems, faith-based or not. The Right Use of Power Institute expounds five types of power that are bedrock to conversations about power:

1. Personal power is "each individual's ability to have an effect or influence."
2. Role or Positional power is "earned, awarded, elected, or assigned" like a vocational position, family role, or specific job.

3. Status power is additional power that is added to us by the cultures we're in and can include "race, age, ability, gender, and socioeconomics."
4. Collective power comes from "gathering personal, role, and status power from multiple sources to effect change toward a common interest."
5. Systemic power is "centered on the combined efforts of collective power that shifts systems, structures, laws, policies, and norms."⁴

We're not going to deep dive into these different forms of power, but they're important to tuck into our heads and hearts as we travel through this material together. It's crucial that we recognize we all have power. Power, in and of itself, isn't bad or negative; *it is what we choose to do with that power that matters*. Unhealthy power is centered on control and diminishing others while healthy power catalyzes liberation and life. Disempowerment—whether it stems from institutions, cultures, or families—limits and harms, while empowerment frees and heals. Popular author, speaker, and researcher Brené Brown writes and speaks extensively about the difference between power over and power with/to/within, especially in leadership and relationship. In the briefest summary, power over is centered on fear, hierarchy, scarcity, and being right, while power with/to/within is built on empathy, expansion, and connection.⁵

Jesus embodied power built on empathy, expansion, and connection, not fear, hierarchy and scarcity. He called his followers to a completely different kind of relationship with power that would bring a new kind of kingdom on earth, here, now. Sadly, Christians aren't leading the way in this conversation on power. We lag behind, and we're some of the worst examples of unhealthy power. Colonization, patriarchy, racism, classism, ableism, and the lies of white supremacy and Christian supremacy are all intensely embedded into our story in the world. And I'm not talking just about Christian history and past sins; I'm talking about today. Here, now. These

dysfunctional beliefs and practices are baked into American Christianity and affect and guide us in ways in which we are often unaware.

While Jesus' words in the Beatitudes about spiritual poverty, mourning, meekness, mercy, justice, and peacemaking were about turning the world upside down, we continue to do all we can to turn it right side up. In other words—our side up.

While Jesus embodied a life of descent, going down into the depths of real problems and pain, so much of the world and often the church is dedicated to the principles of ascent. Instead of caring for the vulnerable, it's often about survival of the fittest. Instead of toppling oppressive systems, most of the energy is spent on preserving and protecting them. Instead of a dedication to equity and sharing, hierarchy and hoarding still prevail.

The deeper I have dived into conversations and practices centered on healthy power, the more I realize I have only scratched the surface.

The roots of unhealthy power run deep.

Our need to stay in control and on top is strong, even primal.

Our addiction to comfort, charismatic leaders, and hierarchical leadership is astonishingly predictable.

Our ineptitude at vulnerable self-reflection and honest conversations about power is extremely disturbing.

For those who are part of families and systems that have diminished or abused us, our inability to own our personal power and God's image in us is heartbreaking.

And for individuals and groups oppressed by dominant power systems, the lack of a willingness by those systems to humbly address and boldly shift power is destructive.

Even though we rarely address it directly, power dynamics are baked into all areas of our lives, including personal and social dynamics, politics, religion, and our relationship with ourselves and others. Power influences our behavior and interactions and overtly and covertly shapes relationships, decision-making processes, and ways in which resources and opportunities in our communities are distributed.

We can't transform ourselves, our communities, or the world without honestly and bravely engaging in conversations and reflections that challenge our personal relationship to power and how that plays out in the circles in which we live and move. How is our unawareness of our personal power limiting us? How are we complicit in unhealthy power structures? How have we been harmed by power? How have we harmed others? How have we given our power to people and systems who used it to amass more for themselves? How is our lack of self-reflection about the power we hold affecting others? How can we play a part in turning over tables and disrupt systems that are unjust and oppressive? These are the kinds of things we need to address more directly in order to cultivate healthy power in our broken world.

To me, the season of Lent, on the road to Easter, is always about intentionally opening ourselves up to what's underneath the surface, what's hidden in the dark, what tectonic plates need to shift for something new to be born. It is also supposed to disrupt us and lead us to action.

DISRUPTING POWER TAKES PRACTICE

In Jesus' pre-entrance into ministry, he spent forty days in the wilderness, tempted to give into an unhealthy, enticing power. In the way the story's told, Satan tries to tempt Jesus to show his power in ways the world values—control, dominion, seized authority. Jesus resists, but we're often not able to. Henri Nouwen writes about this in his book on leadership, *In the Name of Jesus*, and says "What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life."⁶

Maybe power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. Jesus' example of humility and love over worldly power remains our deepest challenge.

The last week of his life, beginning with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, reveals it best. Over the years, I started to call Holy Week *It's Not What You Think Week* instead. Jesus—the promised king—who had been disrupting the status quo from top to bottom for several years, now enters Jerusalem to a roar of “hosannas!” and the thrill of impending victory. People were excited, inspired, drawn, hopeful. They were ready for him to kick butt, topple the empire, and restore justice the way they would. While Jesus started with turning over tables in the temple, as the week progresses, things radically shifted, and soon he was washing feet, talking about dying, and calling them to be one.

It wasn't long that the “hosannas” quickly shifted to “crucify him!”

Many of the same human dynamics are at play today, maybe now more than ever in the story of modern Christianity, our culture, and the world. In all shapes, sizes, and cultures, we are drawn to unhealthy power and charisma, to scapegoating, to divisive and exclusionary practices, and to perpetuating a myriad of conscious and unconscious strategies to resist and reject the Beatitudes-infused kind of power that Jesus embodied and preached.

History continues to prove that disrupting power is countercultural. There are a lot of obstacles, a lot of resistance to it, a lot to lose along the way. Yet, I believe we need to gather strength to forge a better path together, to *reimagine power*, to consider how, in the words misattributed to Mahatma Gandhi but inspiring nonetheless—“we can be the change we want to see in the world.” Part of embodying change is respecting power as a crucial element of our life together; acknowledging that it's always present in every system, group, and relationship; and learning to use our personal and collective power humbly, wisely, and courageously.

I'm looking forward to wrestling along with you over the upcoming weeks. Anything I write is as much for me as it is for anyone reading it; it's never just about words on a page or head knowledge. It's about contemplative action and cultivating community. It's about practices, embodiment,

and being willing to make mistakes, fail, and learn. It's about first healing ourselves and bringing that healing to the families, groups, teams, and systems we live and move in.

Even though I've spent the past eighteen years deep diving into conversations and practices to address issues of power as part of my faith community, The Refuge, which is a hub for healing community, social action, and creative collaboration, I always have so much more to learn. Yes, I'm a straight, married, white woman with a master's degree and children, and that is never lost on me in this conversation. However, I've also had my share of bumping up against unhealthy power as a female pastor in a male-dominated system and working for multiple decades in the margins alongside people who are disempowered by society in almost every way—being unhoused, addicted, struggling with mental illness, single parents, abuse survivors, generational poverty and race and class discrimination, LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities. Another twist is that my husband is from El Salvador, my kids are Brown, and I was raised by a single mom, always barely squeaking by financially. While I've learned a lot about shifting power over time, I continue to crawl, stumble, and bumble my way forward as well. Unhealthy power won't go down easily. In fact, it will fight with everything it's got to protect itself, and that's why sometimes change feels so frustratingly futile.

However, one of the reasons I still follow the ways of Jesus is that he shows us what is possible. He turns power on its head and challenges us to a life dedicated to the same. No matter what faith stream you come from or what you currently do or don't believe, most of us can agree on Jesus' subversiveness, his dedication to exposing and challenging destructive power, in systems and in us personally, and that he modeled what true power is—radical humility, even to death.

The kind of humility Jesus embodied wasn't the false kind that a lot of us learned in church: thinking of ourselves as lowly worms, miserable wretches, or disobedient sinners. The world doesn't need more people who don't recognize our personal

power, our belovedness, our worth and value. It needs more people willing to step into who we were called to be—*forces for healing and hope in this fractured world.*

PREPARE TO BE CHALLENGED

This kind of subversive, countercultural, counterintuitive path is not for the fainthearted. It's not for those who get triggered easily by words like *privilege*, *patriarchy*, and *oppression*. It's not for people who quickly default to the words "but what about . . ." and constantly find a way to deflect responsibility from ourselves or prop up false equivalencies.

Turning Over Tables is for individuals and groups across genders, ages, life experiences, faith stories, and social demographics who want to engage in six-plus weeks of accessible, easy-to-digest daily reflections that center on power in a variety of ways. Each section will have a guiding theme—open, reveal, lament, repent, disrupt, cultivate, illuminate, embody, and sustain—to help us move through these weeks together. Our journey will include revealing how deeply issues of imbalanced power are embedded into us as humans and the systems we create, lamenting and grieving our contributions to harmful power or how we've diminished our own personal power, confession and healthy repentance, seeking new possibilities to embody healthy power, cultivating collaborative power through relationship and indigenous wisdom, illuminating the last week of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and exploring what these mean for our lives and today's social realities. While we can't unpack every aspect of power in the way it deserves in this short season together, we can open ourselves up to greater awareness that power dynamics are an undercurrent in most every aspect of our lives together and gain some language and practical ways to integrate change into our lives.

At the end of each week there are group reflection questions, prompts to help us grieve and lament (we can't skip over this part), actions and embodied practices to try individually and

collectively, and prayers for action together. In the back of the book, there's a short section for church or organizational leaders hoping to shift power in their communities, as well as resources to explore far more deeply than we can in this space.

No matter where you are at in your faith story and whether you are on the underside of power, from a group traditionally marginalized because of race, gender, ability, economics, sexual orientation, relationship status, physical or mental disabilities, neurodivergence, body size, or other realities, I hope these words will strengthen and empower you. Please take care of yourself in any ways you need, recognizing that you know firsthand how power can be destructive.

If you're in a group that is typically on the upside of power, I am extra glad this book is in your hands! It is brave—and countercultural—to engage in this conversation and realities about power (and why this material might not be popular). However, I also want to warn you: it means that as you're reading you might feel anger or defensiveness or have the urge to close it and put it back on the shelf. I respect those feelings and have wrestled with knowing this might not feel like a traditional Lent devotional for some because it has less engagement with Bible verses and more reflections on how we live as part of wider culture beyond solely faith spaces. Discomfort is part of the Lenten season—and most certainly part of any power work—so let's welcome it, knowing that's what makes deeper transformation more possible.

My hope is that no matter where we're entering into this exploration of power we come humbly, find our own edges, listen to what is stirring up in us, and consider shifts in our lives and leadership that help heal and repair power differentials. It's an honor to walk alongside you this season, and I hope you can hang in there with me; I'm struck more than ever that disrupting entrenched power systems is lifelong personal, systemic, and spiritual work, and it's also extremely vulnerable.

Let's start with a deep breath, an open heart, and a posture of learning as we bravely honor our mortality, our relationship to power, and these human realities that are all tangled up together.

The First Days of Lent

OPEN

“There is within you a lamb and a lion. Spiritual maturity is the ability to let lamb and lion lie down together.”

—Henri J. M. Nouwen¹

Throughout Lent 2024, bombs were falling in Gaza, Palestine, and the death toll was surging past thirty thousand, with the majority being women and children. I have no idea where things will be by the time you’re engaging with this material, but I do know that something shifted with the Israel-Hamas War that began October 7, 2023, in terms of greater international engagement on the realities of the Palestinian story and the pain of the Jewish community. So many of us, especially younger people, are experiencing a significant revealing of the oppression, complexity, and political entanglements involved in a new way. Eyes have been opened, hearts have been broken, and generational trauma has been revealed that has catalyzed a wide range of responses. Things feel dark, bleak, somewhat hopeless, and powerless.

Ash Wednesday, the entrance into the season of Lent and a day that millions of Christians of all shapes and sizes honor in a variety of ways, feels like the right space holder for some of these real and present feelings. I didn’t grow up in a religious home, and some of these rhythms weren’t part of my life until far into my spiritual journey. My grandparents were Catholic, and when I was young, I would stay with them for a few weeks every

summer and attend mass. Honestly, I didn't really understand the whole experience and always felt behind the curve—the sitting, standing, reading, smells, bells, and the rote responses were foreign. Yet, I also remember experiencing something very grounding about it—the sense of everyone being on the same page, reverent, connected, inspired. When I started my own personal faith journey in college and my early years of marriage as a Christian, I landed in the nondenominational, attractional church world where there wasn't a liturgy or any connectedness to the church calendar. No one ever mentioned Ash Wednesday or the season of Lent, and Easter Sunday always just popped out of nowhere as the biggest, most exciting event of the year.

In that church culture, conversations about death, pain, and grief were either entirely skipped over or met with a response that if we prayed enough, believed enough, and trusted God enough, we could escape those hard feelings.

I didn't honor Ash Wednesday until The Refuge chose to do a liturgical year together in our first few years of existence, and I feel grateful for the simple and holy space of honoring the reality of my mortality, our mortality, and the humbling that creates. Receiving a cross of ashes on my forehead, reading Genesis 3:19, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” felt hard at first but comforting too. In so many ways, the world's culture always wants to skip this hard, dusty, gloomy part of the human experience and get right to the “good stuff,” which in Christian culture is often Easter and the resurrection. It's far more popular to focus on life and not death.

This is part of the social problem—both in and outside of faith spaces—and intersects with our addiction to unhealthy power. Most of us don't like to be humbled. We don't like to feel uncomfortable. We don't like to talk about death. And we certainly don't like to be called dust.

Yet, that's our starting place.

Not as people who are nothing, but as people who recognize our right size in the big story of the world: that we are humans, mere mortals, fragile, vulnerable, with a limited lifespan on this earth. This is what we have in common with every other human being on the planet, no matter which continent we live on or

which religion we ascribe to. We're all going to physically die. *From dust we all came and to dust we shall return.*

Letting that sink in is lifetime work because a lot of us—especially those who may be steeped in a Christian theology that teaches us that because of God we are somehow better than others—have been conditioned to think that our faith somehow makes us more immune to calamity, insulate us from problems and pain, and make life easier (even though Jesus makes the opposite fairly clear). This has led a lot of people to separate from those who make us feel uncomfortable and to do all we can to stay on the mountaintop of life instead of walking in the lowlands of the valley.

When I visited Israel and Palestine years ago, we went to Judea, in the Jericho region of Israel, the place where Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry. It is stark, rugged, and dusty land, and it makes sense it would be a place of wrestling, struggle, and revelation, where he would be confronted with temptation to give into unhealthy power as an escape.

Wrestling, struggle, revelation.

That's not only the story of Lent but also the story of progress, change, and social transformation. We need wrestling, struggle, and revelation to get to a new place in our own story, in the world's story.

As we launch into this first week together, I hope we can be open to what emerges. For these first few days, we're going to explore how easy it is to make ourselves too big or too small, to consider how power exists on a spectrum, and to see how a scarcity mentality related to power is central to its misuse. Hopefully, we're going to be open to change and possibility with a posture of openness to the Spirit moving through us, stirring, challenging, healing.

Father Thomas Keating says that “the process of conversion begins with genuine openness to change—openness to the possibility that just as natural life evolves, so too the spiritual life evolves.”² We're evolving, the world's evolving, our faith is evolving. And this is why we need new eyes to see, new light to seek, new practices to embody. As we express our desire to see power more clearly and be open to possibility, may new light come, together.

What are you hoping to wrestle with this season?

ASH WEDNESDAY

Rightsized

“Let us strip off anything that slows us down or holds us back, and especially those sins that wrap themselves so tightly around our feet and trip us up.”

—Hebrews 12:1 TLB

I’ve been going to 12-step meetings for over twenty years, and there’s a recovery principle that has been extremely forming for me. In its simplest form, it’s about *rightsizing ourselves—not making ourselves too big or too small*. Owning this, honoring this, is one of the healthiest things we can do to embody a different way of moving in the world. These kinds of simple spiritual truths are one of the many reasons I still go to meetings for codependence and the impacts of being an adult child of an alcoholic. In my experience, people in recovery seem to better recognize our humanness than in many other circles I’ve been in; the raw honesty that is present at every meeting keeps me coming back because I know I’m in good company with other humans who aren’t trying to wriggle out of our humanness but, rather, face it head on.

Part of rightsizing ourselves as a principle in recovery is recognizing our tendency to make ourselves bigger than we really are—where we think we’re better than others, smarter, more disciplined, more spiritual, more responsible than others, more . . . *whatever*. This “bigger and better than” mentality keeps us safe and protected, apart from others, superior to others, over others—and tired. At the same time, we can also do what many of us have been taught in unhealthy Christian systems or abusive families—believe that we are lower than others, smaller than others, not good enough, unworthy, have little to contribute and that we are nothing apart from a particular kind of theology. It might seem strange, but often, these two mentalities coexist!

Rightsizing is a solid starting principle and core thread to weave through this first week together as we hold space for today, Ash Wednesday, and our entrance into the Lenten season (or, if you're not utilizing this material specifically for Lent, your entrance into an intentional journey to engage with power either individually or with a group). There's not a time or season that isn't good for *rightsizing* ourselves, where we're not too big, not too small. I sometimes like to pause and remind myself that I'm just human like the rest of the world, made of flesh and blood, sure to take my last breath like every other human who ever existed and will ever exist in the future. Plus, it's good to remember that we're part of a story that started before us and will end after us. When we rightsize ourselves, we're no more or no less than others. We're human.

Unfortunately, culture and religion aren't the best at rightsizing and often reinforce all kinds of conflicting messages—that we're better than or worse than other people, less valuable than other people, more immune to pain or more powerful than other people. And because the deep grooves of racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism are intertwined in culture and religion, the result is often division and dissonance not only in our own personal experiences but also in the systems we are part of.

Days like Ash Wednesday, where we are confronted with our humanity, our mortality, can help equalize and ground us in a deeper truth. It helps remind us that we came from dust and we'll return to it. It can help us be more honest, humble, vulnerable, and rightsized, and these are the essential ingredients that are needed in conversations about power.

Dusty ones, this Ash Wednesday, let's humbly rightsize ourselves—not too big, not too small.

What does rightsizing yourself mean to you today?

THURSDAY

On a Spectrum

“Power—It’s everywhere. Some seek or measure themselves by it, and some avoid or downplay it. Seldom do we pay attention to how having more or less power impacts relationships. . . . We grow our abilities to use our power for good or ill through many relationships and over a lifetime.”

—Cedar Barstow³

Years ago, my friend Sasha, who leads Refuge Rainbow, our community’s queer support group for youth and allies, did an LGBTQ+ Listen and Learn for our community. She shared how gender and sexuality is “fluid, flexible, and exists on a spectrum.”⁴

Fluid, flexible, and exists on a spectrum.

As soon as she said it, I knew there was something about those three characteristics that described other areas of the human experience too.

When we’re processing power this season, it’s good to remember that issues of power are fluid, flexible, and exist on a spectrum. For some of us, we’re in positions of power, leadership, or authority that are very clear in our work, but we may feel a differing range of power in those roles. Many of us may be white and financially resourced yet also find ourselves in a particular place in terms of power and society but because we’re LGBTQ+, divorced, or neurodivergent. Others may come from groups that have been typically unempowered by our structures because of race, gender, age, socioeconomics, but are educationally privileged.

Power is fluid, flexible, and exists on a spectrum.

Faith is also fluid, flexible, and exists on a spectrum.

Embracing, honoring, and owning this helps us in these conversations because it reminds us that these issues

are complex—personally and communally—and they are always running as an undercurrent in all our experiences.

For some of us, we have power in one role or reality and far less in another. We might have positional power because of our vocation but little to no sense of personal power in other relationships. If we're aging, we might feel a lack of power at this stage of our story but remember the days when we held it.

As we rightsize ourselves in the human story, begin looking honestly at ourselves and the cultures we are in, and explore the unique realities we are all experiencing, I hope we'll let ourselves be open to engaging with power as a living, breathing, evolving reality that needs attention, reckoning, and healing.

Let's embrace the wide range of ways we engage with our own personal power, relational power, positional power, and spiritual power and honor that they are all at play in our stories. It's comforting—and challenging—to remember that as people of faith and hope, we can help justice and equity flow more freely and fully for everyone, not just ourselves.

As we wrestle with power together in the days and weeks to come, we can draw on the reality that power is fluid, flexible, and exists on a spectrum.

Reflect on where you've been in the past in relationship to power and where you might be now.

FRIDAY**Power Is Not like Pie**

“Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.”

— John 6:11–13

Oh humans, we love to make things comfortable, predictable, measurable, finite! When it comes to power, we often think of it as a limited resource (there’s only so much) or as being a certain size (bigger is better). We think of it like a pie: the more guests you serve, the smaller each piece must be. We think that when someone gets more power, it means someone else has to get less. This scarcity mindset about power runs deep.

This is why when people in the dominant group consider any underrepresented group stepping into greater leadership, capacity, or resourcing in some way, they often default to thinking, *What does this mean for me? What will I lose?* At the same time, I have seen some people who were traditionally unempowered get a new role or position and immediately begin to overpower others, making rules they themselves would have hated and taking as much power as they could as quickly as possible. It’s fascinating.

It’s because we often think power is like pie.

Fortunately, power is far more like loaves and fishes.

There’s this wild, beautiful, and miraculous thing that can happen when we share power together and make room for all of us—*it multiplies*.

When we believe power is like pie and there are only so many slices, someone’s always going to go hungry, and that’s most likely the person or group with the least power. When I was the only female leader on a big church staff where power was treated like

pie, I would always feel the sense of knowing I was going to get only the crumbs left in the pan; and that frequently happened. I was the one who could do the announcements but not preach from the front, come to meetings but never lead them, work my tail off on a project but not get the credit.

The upside-down ways of Jesus were always about shaking up power: challenging dysfunctional religious leaders; denouncing fear and control, which is a driving force of unhealthy power; and admonishing people for adopting a spirit of scarcity instead of abundance. He consistently disrupted the systems of power that keep people divided, oppressed, and imprisoned.

After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus began his three years of stirring the pot on power, starting with these words from the Jewish prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
(Luke 4:18–19 NIV)

Four chapters later he fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish.

Whether you believe all the alleged facts of the story or not, one thing that prevails about Jesus (not “the church”) is that he was dedicated to dismantling fear, control, and self-protection so that people could be liberated, free, and equal.

Sure, most everything still operates on the scarcity concept of power being like pie.

But seeing power through a new lens that opens our eyes and heart, power becomes much more like loaves and fishes that empower the many while disempowering no one.

How have you intersected with power from a scarcity mindset?

SATURDAY

Pause and Ponder: What's Opening in You?

We covered a few core ideas in a short amount of time this entry week: rightsizing ourselves, holding that power is fluid, flexible, and exists on a spectrum; and remembering that power is not finite or scarce. These may not be the lessons you expected at the start of a Lenten journey, but they will help us as we step into next week. Remember, these first few days are focused on being open—open about our own story and experiences as we begin to connect with power, open to noticing where we might feel our bodies constrict or where we might feel relief, open to the Spirit's stirring, open to learn, and open to keep engaging and growing. We've touched on some big topics, and now it's time to pause, ponder, and reflect on what emerged for us in these first few days before we move into our first full week—where the realities of misused power are revealed more clearly, together.

Wrestle, Reflect, Engage

Reflection Questions

1. Looking back on this first week together, what words, phrases, or concepts emerged for you? What resonated?
2. Share how the idea of rightsizing might help you with entering into the season of Lent this year. How can you let go of thinking of yourself as “too big” or “too small”?
3. Reflect on the idea of power being more like loaves and fishes than pie. How would some of the groups and systems you are part of look differently if that reality was more present?
4. What is your intention this season related to power, and in what ways are you hoping to grow?

Prompts for Grief and Gratitude

Don't overthink these questions. Use them as a guide to engage with simple unedited honesty just for yourself.

- ~ When it comes to rightsizing, I know I've made myself too ____ and/or too ____, and I am sad that it's created these impacts in my life and work: ____.
- ~ As I consider my relationship with power and the first week of reflections, I'm grateful that I've ____.

Actions and Practices

1. Go outside at night and spend some time looking up at the stars, the moon, the dark sky, considering the vastness of the universe and our humble position in it. Notice how that feels.
2. With a pen and piece of paper (or markers, crayons, colored pencils if you'd like), sketch images that reflect power that's finite and scarce (like pie) and exponential and multiplying (like loaves and fishes). If images feel hard to draw, write words that describe each. Consider groups, systems, relationships that you have been or are part of. When it comes to power, what have they been more like? Write or draw words that describe what it was like to be part of them.
3. Begin to open your eyes this week to power at play in the circles you live and move in. Tune in and notice what you observe, feel, are concerned about, and are challenged by.

*God, Spirit, Advocate,
keep revealing truths where we are blind;
keep healing us where we are wounded;
keep moving us forward when we are afraid.
May we remain humble, open, vulnerable
as we keep seeing power more clearly together.
Amen.*