

I can almost hear the conversation that had gone on earlier, the last time James and John had stopped home to visit their mother. It wasn't the first time their mom had brought the subject up. She'd been talking about it ever since it became clear that they weren't going to give up hanging around Jesus to go out and get respectable positions in banking or shipping.

So she raises it again: "Well you could at least ASK him! You're both bright, loyal, deserving followers – exactly the kind of men that should be first in his kingdom. Jack, you'd make a wonderful chief executive officer for his kingdom, and Jim, you'd be great as chief operating officer. That would leave Jesus free to do more of that which he does best."

James and John have to admit that her suggestion has a certain appeal, but they wince at the thought of coming right out and asking. What if Jesus rips them up one side and down the other for their pushiness and lack of humility? Even if he doesn't, the other disciples will be merciless if they hear of it. So James makes an alternative suggestion: "No, Mom, it will be far better if you're the one who asks him. He'll understand a mother making a request like this for her sons and so will the others. They all have mothers."

True, in reading about it from this distance, it seems to be a brazen and presumptuous bit of power-grabbing. But I suspect we understand it better than it may be comfortable to admit. The appetite for power is a major dynamic in our life together. Both for those who have power and those who don't, it can be a real preoccupation or obsession.

The headlines keep us quite aware of abuses of power, of those in positions of power who become merciless, insensitive, selfish, arrogant, corrupted, and even delusional. There are plenty of living illustrations of the truth of that cliché that says that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

More subtle, though, and not nearly as well understood, is what can happen to people who have come to feel that they are powerless (or nearly so) and, thus, boil with resentment over their powerlessness.

One writer described a conversation with a young man who had really chafed against working for someone else and couldn't wait to get into business for himself. He finally did – a healthy sub-assembly operation. A couple of years later, when a friend inquired as to how it felt now to be in a position of power, he replied, "I haven't the faintest idea, because I have no power. The police won't let me park in front of my own building. The tax people dictate how I have to keep my own books. My banker decides what my minimum bank balance will be and what chances I'm allowed to take. Suppliers end up

controlling productivity. The union tells me who can work and what work they may do.” He paused for a moment and then went on sullenly, “To top it all off, I got married last year.”

There you have it – even from one we’d think wouldn’t feel that way. But one doesn’t have to listen long to hear echoes of people who feel dis-empowered. It’s major source of smoldering dissatisfaction, free-floating resentment, and of people viewing life as little more than a permanent competition for power.

One of the more ominous recent examples of people sickened by their sense of powerlessness has been the common-law militia groups that spring up in our country. Those who study them tell us that they’re made up of people who, for real or imagined reasons, feel stripped of the power to which they believe themselves entitled, so have set out to bootleg their own kind of power -- whatever power there might be in violence, terror, or disruption.

Something similar is believed to fuel a certain amount of the fixation with guns in this country. For people who feel pushed aside, ignored, not taken seriously, and who generally feel shoved to the bottom of what they perceive as the “pecking order,” guns represent power to them – the power of life and death. “You may not respect me or listen to me or care about me, but what you may not know is that I have the hardware – the firepower -- to make people take me seriously anytime I want to do so.”

Some studies indicated that the astounding sale of the larger, four-wheel-drive pickup trucks and utility vehicles in recent years had to do with the power needs of purchasers. They point out that the overwhelming majority of those vehicles were purposeless; that is, they never came close to being used in ways or places that required either the size or the off-road capabilities they offer. In such cases, what’s apparently appealing about them is the feeling of dominance and the fantasy that, should I wish to, I could turn right off this pavement, and drive through that ditch, over that fence, over that field, through yonder creek, and just about anywhere else I choose. Again, they never do it, but it feels empowering to know that they can if they wish.

There’s strong conjecture that some of the battering of local schools in much of this country goes on because the schools are almost the last public entity over which people feel that they can exercise power. Though having no power over federal or state taxes, what they can do is vote down the local school levy. It may be the dynamic at another level, too. For example, “Though I didn’t educate myself as well as I now know I should have, I do have some power to prevent the schools from having certain kinds of classes and certain books in their libraries that I don’t understand and that make me feel obsolete.”

Over the years I’ve known a few churches that were badly torn up by people who felt powerless in every other theater of their lives, so used the church as the theater for acting out their power needs: blocking, leading factions, becoming tyrannical – anything and everything that passed for influence, authority, or control.

Do you see? Whether because of relationships, a work situation, social injustice, poverty, background, race, or yet something else, feelings of powerlessness easily breed erratic, troublesome, and strident behavior.

And yet, at its best, the wish for power isn't a bad thing. In fact, it has a noble side to it. The wish to be effective in one's world, the desire to have one's life make a difference, the appetite for becoming some kind of light and inspiration to others, and the striving to understand and claim one's own dignity and unique worth are the profoundly good side of striving for power.

The problem comes in the misunderstanding of the nature and the source of personal power. Unfortunately, even after everything we've experienced in our human history, there's still an impression that power is conferred upon us from outside, rather than created within us.

The mother of James and John believed that, if they were given those high positions, it would empower her boys. Jesus answered her by saying, "You don't know what you are asking..." "This isn't mine to grant..." In effect, "what you desire for them is a 'grace' that has to happen from within. I can't bestow it."

That IS the way it works with real personal power. One can acquire a position demanding obedience. She may achieve some kinds of dominance and control. He may become skilled at strategies of intimidation and/or in the use of force. But those are merely what people resort to who don't have the real thing. Real personal power and personal authority, meanwhile, are an inner quality -- something that radiates through and from a person.

It's very difficult to describe, but every one of us has seen and experienced the real thing in people.

They are men or women, for example, who may have no position of authority, no special credentials, or even any particular expertise, and, yet, we always remember whether they were present that day or not. We find that, for some difficult-to-explain reason, what THEY think is important to us. When they speak, people listen -- even those who don't agree with them. They "make sense," as we say, not because their logic is always flawless, but because there is something coherent about them as individuals.

Where does that kind of power come from? It's dangerous to generalize about it, but some part of it definitely has to do with the person having a "center" to his or her life; that is, a foundation of principles, values, and convictions that make sense of her. She is NOT "space for rent." When he speaks, you don't have the feeling that you're hearing merely echoes of the last person he talked to, the last article he read, or what she thinks (or hopes) will make everyone like her.

There's a profound confidence to the truly powerful person. It isn't confidence in the sense of bravado, but a confidence underneath that comes of believing that there's a larger process at work in life and the world, one which makes it unnecessary to scurry around, trying to control everything, pin down every

outcome in advance, make up his mind about everything that goes on, have something to say on every subject, or always appear to be right.

Another component of personal power seems to be that of self-forgiveness. One who doesn't get stuck in the withering, exhausting work of having to disguise his every weakness, or doesn't have to justify or whitewash every mistake, one who doesn't have to carry the baggage of old guilts and remorse is an empowered person. That's because propping up those unreal ego-fantasies of total competence and illusions of near-perfection saps not only one's credibility, but his strength.

People of real power – the ones who have the kind of internal authority of which we're speaking – are also almost always “lovers” – lovers of people, lovers of the creation around them, and lovers of the whole throbbing, changing, demanding, mind-boggling experience of being alive. Why would it work that way? Because a person sees and understands infinitely more in whatever he or she loves. Whether it's loving people or time or the created order or yet other dimensions of our “aliveness,” to love it and be enthusiastic about it is to become wise with regard to it. It's to be able to sense what is needed and, thereby, have the power to bring forth the best from whatever it is.

If all this begins to sound a lot like a man named Jesus -- that one who never held any official position of power, whose education was informal, whose supporters were nobodies from the margins of society, who never got out of the borders of what was his forlorn little country – this is no coincidence. Part of what made him so astounding to those around him was that, with none of the trappings of office, no credentials, no organized support, without power plays, influence games, intimidation, or “one-upmanship,” there was, nevertheless, something so powerful and so authoritative about him, just in the way he lived and spoke, that people were in awe. They were at a loss to put into words what they had experienced. They told stories, came up with anecdotes, and invented theologies that they hoped would partly explain how his personal coherence and integrity, his composure and confidence, and his insight and spirituality always left them feeling that maybe they had seen in him, what God might look like in human form.

And though not to that extent, that same quality of personal, internal power and authority is within the reach of every one of us. It comes with our discovering, and then trusting, the fact that it isn't how much we control, but how much we understand; that, instead of how imposing we are, it's all a matter of how authentic we are; that it unfolds from how much we appreciate, not how much we possess; that, instead of talent or charisma that sometimes gets so much attention, empathy and perceptiveness are the real source of it.

That, in a nutshell, is the gist of it. No one is powerless, unless he chooses to be. But the only power worth discussing is that which comes exclusively from being credible, coherent, responsive centers of

love, creation, hope, and healing. And, as we saw in Jesus, it's precisely what we were created to be: amazing, inventive, marvelously effective, powerful beings. Every one of us, if we choose to unfold it, has far more capacity to create and improvise and inspire and transform the life around us than we'll ever need.