

“Are you power hungry or power fearful?”  
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Since getting married, I have discovered two new superpowers. The first is the uncanny ability to be frequently *wrong*. And I don't just mean a little wrong; I mean completely, pray-to-God-for-forgiveness wrong. The second power—and this one's personally far more enjoyable—is the exceptional capacity to tease Jenna (some might say “annoy”... others, “frustrate till you pull your hair out”). I'm quite fond of this second power! Though I'm not always fond of the consequences.

Now, we have generally been taught that the desire for power, whether in marriage or in life, is bad. The mind doesn't have to search far for times when power has been used to hurt, humiliate, and exploit. We know its names: bullying, slavery, patriarchy, domestic abuse, fascism, demagoguery. It's in our popular media: think Darth Vader (pre-redemption) or “the one ring to bind them all.”

As Christians, Jesus Christ has become for us a model of power-effacing humility.

When James and John, in the Gospel of Mark, ask Jesus to grant them the favor of sitting on his right and left sides in glory, Jesus rebukes them, presenting a classic Christian reversal of power, saying, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10: 41-45).

So what's up with Elisha in our passage today? Isn't he wrong to ask Elijah for double the power, double the spirit? Isn't he being arrogant? Hasn't he fundamentally misunderstood, just like the disciples, the whole point of God's prophetic ministry?

To understand Elisha's request, we're going to need to get into his head.

God is taking Elijah away. Elisha is about to lose his friend, his mentor, the pastor that's been with him for many years, and now Elisha is supposed to take his place. But Elisha's not sure that he's up to the task.

So Elisha makes a bold request. He asks for double the spirit of Elijah. At first, it sounds like he wants to be better than Elijah. But in truth, he's asking for the inheritance of a first-born son in Hebrew society, where first-born sons received double the portion of their siblings.

It turns out this is an intimate exchange between a scared boy, who wants a father who tells him it's going to be OK, and an aging man, who has no one to pass his legacy on to.

And it is in this boy's shaking hands that God places power. The power to heal and perform miracles. The power that's going to sustain him for the long road ahead as he confronts unjust kings and mends a hurting people. This power is what turns a scared boy into a prophet.

It would seem that we must be dealing with two different kinds of power.

In chemistry, and I stole this from the TV show *Breaking Bad*, there's a concept called chirality. A molecule is chiral if it's different from its mirror image, in the same way that our hands are mirror images of each other but also opposite.

In the show, Walt gives the example of the molecule thalidomide, which was prescribed in the 1950s and '60s to alleviate the nausea of morning sickness. In the tumult of the digestive system, thalidomide can however make a molecular transformation into its chiral pair. When it becomes its mirror image, it has an entirely different effect—it causes horrid birth defects.

Power, Scripture may be telling us, may act like thalidomide; it may be chiral.

On the one hand, there's the power we know, the power condemned by Christ: this power is about me and the control I exert *over* others. It is seized by making others weak. It violently defends the ego. It is the power used by Ahab and Jezebel to kill Naboth and steal his vineyard. On the other hand, there's the kind of power Jesus is talking about when he promises a double portion of *his* spirit, saying in John 14 that we will do even greater things than he. This power is about God and what we can do *together* to change the world. It is gracious and self-sacrificial. It is a gift that makes others stronger, not weaker. It is the power Elijah uses to feed the widow and then to save the life of her son.

Now, just as with thalidomide, there is always the danger that God's gift of power can, in the tumult of this world, transform into its chiral pair and opposite. I think of how easily Elijah turned to violence in our reading last week and how Elisha himself will turn to violence later in this chapter.

And that's why there's a character in this story who often gets overlooked. The text refers to this character as the "company of prophets." It is this company that recognizes and validates Elisha's power. God's gift of power does not come to one individual alone; it comes to a community, in which there is mutual accountability—people to help us stay on the path.

Let me tell you about one such miracle-working community.

In an affluent, expensive neighborhood in Ann Arbor, Michigan, children play under an old Elm tree that sits next to a row of homes that have been built to provide affordable housing to lower-income families and homeless people.

Realizing that the working-class people who labored in Ann Arbor could not afford to live in Ann Arbor, some churches and other faith communities got together to try to do something about this. After a series of meetings, they incorporated as Religious Action for Affordable Housing. They began with a board of directors of 15 people, no paid staff, and no office. But together they

leveraged the power of their moral values to fundraise for capital investment, to advocate at city, county, and state levels, and to raise awareness in their congregations. They built power by finding partners in the community, each of whom contributed expertise, capital, and people power. They reached out to talk with neighbors.

Soon homeowners organized resistance and hired an attorney. They said they were concerned that low-income housing would draw criminal and unwanted elements, creating an unsafe environment.

And no, our religious activists, in a fit of zealous righteousness, did not then slaughter the homeowners. They talked and listened to them. They incorporated some, not all, of their suggestions into their plans. They researched and clarified misconceptions. They rallied their base. They built relationships between the resistant homeowners and the low-income families.

And by the end, eight out of the nine members of the city planning commission voted in favor of the affordable housing. They raised \$200,000 and secured grants totaling \$4.5 million. It took years to accomplish, but now families have a home where they didn't before.

That is power. That is the power wielded by communities of faith, gifted by God, held in trust for the benefit of all God's children.

Look, I know it's scary. We are tempted to choose easier and more comfortable mantles.

But do we not feel that we are capable of more than the maintenance of a dying religion, a crumbling building? Are we not called to make disciples and turn wide the world to the dawning of a light such that blind men see and old men dream dreams?

We are the inheritors of the legacy of Elijah and Elisha, of Moses and Jesus. We have a mantle that is waiting for us too. It is not available to the other powers of this world. We, God's prophets, not the world's kings, will part rivers.

And there is indeed a river waiting to be parted, a wide ocean of pain and longing. We, like Elisha, stand on the banks of our own Jordan River, still grieving what has passed, our feet sinking in the mud, afraid that we won't measure up, but we need only to open our eyes to the glory of God and bend down and pick up that mantle, so that we too can work miracles. Together, let us strike the waters. Let us cross to the other side. Let's shout the words of that old hymn: "swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home." It's not death it's carrying us to. It's freedom, and it's power.

**Amen.**