

## Mother, may I? A Pastors Week sermon

Regina Shands Stoltzfus

**I** am not an athlete by any stretch of the imagination. I tried hard as a child: no one wants to be the last person picked for a dodge ball or kickball team. Eventually I gave up. Now as an adult in a family full of people who love sports, I pretend that I don't get it: "What's the big deal? One team wins, the other loses. The people who lose feel bad. That's terrible." I know. I've been in that position.

But I do get it. I understand the appeal of winning. I understand what it means to be able to say, "I am better than you are at this." I know, because there were some games that I liked to play as a child. One game I liked was "Mother, may I?" I enjoyed being in the position of all-powerful Mother, facing the row of players

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and deciding how far each one would get to advance. I would say, "Susie, take three giant steps." Susie would respond, as the game prescribes, "Mother, may I?" And I would answer, "Why yes, you may." Susie would advance her three steps. Then I would say, "Billy, take ten giant steps forward." And Billy, all excited, would be lured into taking those ten giant steps. But he would have to go back because in his excitement he'd forgotten to ask, "Mother, may I?" The pleasure of playing was the chance to be the

one to say, "Yes, you may" or "No, you may not." I liked being in a position to bestow favors on my friends and exact vengeance on the kids who chose me last for their kickball team. Games give us the thrill of being in charge, of being the one who knows what's going on, of being in control.

We are all familiar with the thrill of power. As we get older and begin to understand its varied faces, we begin to feel some dis-

comfort with it, to perceive its ambiguities. We may still hunger for it, but we sense that we're not supposed to want it, so we deny that we do. But something in us still wants to be important, to be listened to, to have influence, to be loved, to know and be known.

In Matthew 4:1-11, the devil comes to Jesus and tempts him with familiar wants and needs. We need to be filled. We need to be free from hunger. We need to be free from harm. We need to have a sense that some things are ours. We think we need to be in charge. These are the things the tempter offers Jesus: You'll never be hungry again. You'll never be harmed. All these things I'll give you.

But didn't Jesus already have all these things? "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus had all the kingdoms of the world, yet in his life, ministry, and death, he turned around the way we think about having and using power, about having and using things. The story of his birth, a bit before our text in Matthew, alludes to this leveling of our understanding of power. John announces Jesus' coming, quoting Isaiah 40, which says, "Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low." Things that are up high will be brought low. The low places and the high places will be leveled, evened out.

Now, I've talked about our discomfort with power. But I want to say that power often gets a bad rap. We hear the word *power*, and we think: "That's bad. I'm not supposed to want it, so I'm going to act like I don't." We have seen how power corrupts, and we know the saying about absolute power corrupting absolutely, but we forget that God promises to give us power. So we dare not just throw it out the window. God spoke, and by the power of God's words the world came into being. Jesus told his followers to wait for the Holy Spirit; he assured them that when the Spirit came, they would receive power. We're told that Jesus and the disciples did mighty works of power. Power can be a good thing. Denying power to those who need it is not good. Power can be used in the leveling that God is bringing about.

Some of us are granted power because of who we are or what we have, where we were born, the degrees we've earned, the titles

we have, the education we've received, our skin color, our gender, the part of town we live in—many things we have little control over. Some of this power comes to us automatically because of the circles we move in. I live in a part of town where my street will be plowed soon after it snows. I don't do anything to deserve that; it just happens because of where I live. People only need to know about us that "she's a pastor" or "he's a professor," and our power and status are assumed. When we speak, people listen.

Some of us are denied power because of who we are, where we were born, where we live in town, because we have the wrong skin color, poor education, went to the wrong seminary. Because of these things, some of them within our control and some outside it, others will assume that we don't know what we're talking about, and we will have little influence. All of us sometimes find ourselves in a relatively powerless position. There are times when

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we, the powerless, need to stand up and demand the right to speak.

Because we move in and out of both of these circles, we need to understand how to move, when to step aside because our sister or brother needs to be brought forward.

However well we handle power and use it for the good of others, sometimes we need to sit

down and be quiet. We need to get out of the way. We need to learn when to step back because too much attention is focused on us and it is distracting attention from what God wants us to do, from the places God wants us to go. A rich young man came to Jesus and asked him, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Sell all that you own, and distribute the money to the poor" (Luke 18:22). And the young man went away sad because he was very wealthy.

A woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for years, outcast from her community, separated from her people, with no place to go and little power, heard that Jesus was coming. She summoned up the last bit of her strength and touched the hem of his clothes. Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me" (Luke 8:46). Our limitations and the things we have do not completely define us. God uses every bit of us—who we are, where we are, what we are. Even Jesus

moved in and out of these spheres, depending on who he was around and where he was and what he was doing. In one setting, someone would ask, “Isn’t that Joseph’s son?” In another time and place, someone would protest, “Lord, you will not wash my feet.”

God wants us here and now to use our power to announce the reign of God, bringing all that we are, all that we are part of. Neither our abundance nor our lack of abundance, neither our influence nor our lack of influence, defines us entirely. The whole of what defines us is that we are sons and daughters of the living God. I believe that at the core of our desire for power is the desire to know and be known by God, to love and be loved by God. I think that impulse is what masquerades as a desire to be in charge, to have power, to have stuff.

As Pascal said, we have a God-shaped hole in us, which only God can fill. The beauty of this God-given desire—for power, for love, to be filled—is that God promises to satisfy it. It is our birthright. God says, “All these things I give you.” Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” More audibly than the voice of the tempter may we hear in our ear God’s whisper, God’s promise to give us all things.

Jesus responds to the tempter, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” If we follow Jesus’ example, we will orient ourselves to the things that God has in store for us. We will drown out the noise of the world. We will serve God only. We will approach God: “Mother, may I?” “Father, may I?” “Lord God, may I?” And we will hear the resounding answer, “Yes, you may.” Amen.

### **About the author**

Regina Shands Stoltzfus preached this sermon during Pastors Week at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, in January 2004. She is director of admissions and financial aid at AMBS. She also serves on the MCC Great Lakes Executive Board and as a Damascus Road trainer.