

“Almighty God, you know that *we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves...*”

We prayed that earlier—and that’s quite a statement, isn’t it? It is so unequivocal and blunt. There is a whole conversation we could have over just this, yes?... Do we really have “no power in ourselves to help ourselves”? Is this a belittling, self-pitying perspective which some good therapy should relieve us of?

Obviously, on a very practical level, we all got up this morning, fed and dressed ourselves, and got ourselves to church. So we do have *that* power to help ourselves. Or if others of us did not quite have all those powers this morning, they have other powers still. Members of this congregation are very capable in so many ways. And there are a lot of members of the Keswick community who are very high achievers—you don’t have to look far down the road. We do have some significant powers to help ourselves.

So, to pray “we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves”—is this an example of how Christianity and the Church enfeebles people, making them weak, and creating a community of losers? Well that isn’t us. And that isn’t a lot of Christians. But, indeed, when Christianity has, at different times and places, not been well, it has encouraged passivity and weak-mindedness. But this is not at all what we have been called to by Christ. We do have natural powers to help ourselves and others by virtue of being a continuing creation of God. And we do have supernatural powers by virtue of our baptisms that aid us in being a community of Christ in the world. We have been given agency by God to be able to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

And yet...we also have had unforgettable experiences of feeling powerless and overcome. And it can take different forms in different times of our lives—from being bullied or exiled as a child or teenager or struggling with learning disorders, to feeling helpless as family members and friends struggle, suffering the “slings and arrows” of the “changes and chances” of this life, caught between impossible choices, and a plethora of possibilities for being unwell: depression, anxiety, regret, grief, trauma, habitual thinking patterns, addiction, mental illness, physical illness, and on and on. There are indeed times in our lives when we experience having “no power in ourselves to help ourselves”—and it is simply true. And the most exasperating form of that, once we realize it, is, as Paul described the mystery of the captivity of sin: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19). And there are frequently times when we experience this, writ large, in the *world* itself: when the nations and peoples seemingly have no power in themselves to help themselves—trapped in the past, trapped in cycles of revenge, trapped in mania and delusions of grandeur, and trapped in the paradox of profitable self-destruction.

Powerlessness is a pivotal moment—because we can personally collapse into ourselves, and inevitably we do that. *Or the powerlessness can open us to what is beyond ourselves.* Trusted family, friends, church members, clergy, counselors, doctors... And God. “We admit we are powerless—that our lives have become unmanageable. We come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. And we make a decision...” (from The Twelve Steps). Could there be the equivalence of an AA meeting for all the leaders of the nations and political parties? Could there be alliances that help nations restore their sanity?

Neither the Old nor New Testament—neither Moses nor Jesus—seek to *make us powerless* and vulnerable to yet more captivity...but *truthful in our powerlessness*...and more consciously seeking of the God who keeps seeking us. This God lifts up the fallen, strengthens the weak, and gives new chances. And then something more becomes possible in the midst of our captivities: new life...and reimagined responsibilities for our living in the world.

Our freedom is found in the truth of both our powerlessness...and God’s grace...to again and again find our strength, turning away from what is evil, and turning toward what is good. And that is why we have a such a compelling statement on the cover of our bulletin, easily overlooked, but always, steadily, there:

“We open wide the doors of the church to all who desire sincerely to worship the eternal God whom Jesus revealed. We offer our church for the cure of souls who doubt and for the persuasion of those who have found faith difficult; for the encouragement of the discouraged; for the consecration of the strong; for the inspiration of all who face life daringly; and for the ever-deepening assurance of the life eternal.”