

Matthew 5:38-40

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' [a] 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

Mark 12:17

And Jesus answered and said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at Him.

Matthew 21:12-13

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, " 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.

John 13:14-17

14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Dear FMC Family:

I come to you today with a heavy heart, with head and spirit swirling like a storm. I was asked to speak here the Sunday this most recent chapter in our church history came to light. I was asked to speak again two weeks after that stage of this process terminated.

I come to you in the spirit of a priesthood of all believers. I come to speak my heart openly. Power manifests in various forms, adopting diverse shapes. Its operation becomes apparent in the world when something influences another to undertake actions they wouldn't have otherwise. If someone compels you, pushes you aside, restricts your freedom, or forces you to leave, they wield power over you.

This encapsulates the classic definition of power by Robert Dahl, the political theorist, which asserts that power is the ability of A to prompt B to engage in actions they wouldn't have undertaken otherwise. Understanding power in this context involves recognizing a few crucial components. Power requires two entities, which can be people, institutions, or essentially anything else in the world.

A relationship forms the foundation of power.

Additionally, power necessitates that one party in this relationship performs an action it didn't initially desire. While this might seem straightforward initially, it becomes more complex upon closer examination. What did party B genuinely want? Do you have a clear understanding of your desires?

What are the aspirations of an institution?

In my work—I'm a researcher at the University of Denver—I study different patterns of international relations by measuring some of the material conditions that make some states able to exercise power and influence over others. Countries with larger more technologically sophisticated militaries tend to be more powerful, countries with better resources and more people tend to be more powerful, countries that are strategic and coordinated tend to be more powerful.

The ability to exert power and influence isn't relegated to states in a geopolitical system, though. My boss has power over me to shape my behavior, decisions, and what I work on. My parents have power over me and have gotten me to do things I wouldn't have otherwise done. I have power over my children.

But power is more complex than that.

Power as expressed in these human relationships has the ability to go back and forth—for example, while I have power over my children, they have power over me as well. It's a different kind of power, but they certainly are able to get me to do what I otherwise would not have done. Evelyn, our one year old, has the power to get ice cream from me whenever she wants. Elias, our highschooler, has the power to drive a car.

Power in human relationships becomes dynamic quickly.

What about the power of institutions? When we follow rules and procedures, that can lead to expressions of power—bureaucracies get us to do things that we otherwise would not have done. The power of institutions can be wielded in ways that are just and unjust, transparent and opaque. The power of institutions can be less personal, but power nonetheless to shape and shove. Power also exists in more amorphous ways. There is simply the power I hold as a white straight man—a power that I was born into that's culturally constructed, that is derived from centuries of white straight men sitting in the decision-making spotlight, shaping and shoving reality in their image. This kind of power shapes us in ways that can be very uncomfortable because they challenge the idea that we can simply be good and neutral people in a world of complex dynamics, norms and relationships. But the power of identity is just as powerful as the power we exert in relationships and is also prone to abuse and imbalance.

There are still other ways in which power expresses itself in the world that are even more abstract and vague. Language has power and is not controlled by any individual, in contrast to the power of institutions, nation-states, or a parent over their child. For example, starting a speech with "ladies and gentlemen!" creates an explicit context that the world is full of ladies and gentlemen. It does not create space for people who don't neatly fit into those categories. It gets people to do what they otherwise would not have done.

Power is everywhere—we swim in systems of power.

What does the life of Jesus and the history of the Mennonite church teach us about power? How should we swim in this complex and overdetermined space? In the time that remains, I want to posit that Jesus taught that there are different ways to think about power depending on whether that power exists "in the world", or in the community. Jesus provided examples of power that is expressed in the world, outside of community.

He spoke about principles such as turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, and giving the clothes off your back, as we heard in the scripture earlier today. Walter Wink, an American theologian, interpreted these teachings to emphasize nonviolent resistance. For instance, turning the other cheek doesn't merely signify submission to violence, but rather a form of resistance within one's capacity. A kind of response to power that nonviolently inverts power dynamics.

Wink's argument unfolds as follows: In Jesus' era, it was a right-handed dominant world, where the left hand was considered unclean. The specific mention of striking the right cheek in the verse is crucial for this interpretation. To execute this, one would need to use the back of the right hand. By turning the cheek, one not only invited another strike, but this time from either the front of the right hand or the unclean left hand. Striking with the open hand of the right symbolized treating the recipient as an equal, as a backhand was reserved for a slap from masters to slaves.

The same conclusions can be drawn from the other two examples in Jesus' teaching. If someone requests you to walk a mile, go the extra mile. In this context, Roman soldiers had the authority to compel someone to carry their pack for a mile but not beyond that. If you willingly walked an additional mile, the soldier could face repercussions for abusing their power.

When someone asks for your robe, hand over your cloak as well. This scenario illustrates that if you were to surrender all your clothes when only the outer ones were requested, you would end up naked. This act was taboo and highlighted the abuse of power by the more influential party.

Mennonite history is replete with examples of this kind of resistance that inverts power dynamics. The Martyrs Mirror chronicles the people who were killed at the hands of the state across time for living their faith in ways that were inconvenient for people in power. Some Mennonites have not paid taxes to protest military spending. Just the other day a group of Mennonites sat and sang hymns in support of a ceasefire in Gaza drawing ire from the powerful.

Jesus treated power dynamics differently in the community. Here, he showed anger at injustices—see the verse today about money changers in the temple. Jesus modeled how to treat power and grace in the example of him washing the feet of his disciples. Here, God in human form, omnipotent, stoops to wash the feet of those who live with him in community, washing away not just the dirt, but the idea of masters and servants, the uneven power. The kind of power we aspire to in this community is the transformative power of love, grace, forgiveness, and peace.

There are other definitions of power than the Robert Dahl one I started with—broader definitions than the ones I presented here. For example, power can also be understood as possibility. And I believe that the possibility we work towards—the kingdom—is a world free from masters and slaves where everyone is free to coexist as stewards of our shared resources. I advocate for a space among us where we are sensitive to the power we have individually and collectively and try with full hearts to express our resistance to the unjust power of the world.

A collective trauma has affected us, and now we must seek paths toward a grace that transcends— a grace that forgives while holding power accountable. Let us coexist and love each other, finding ways to express righteous anger when necessary and embracing radical grace through the unending power and love of God expressed in our community.

