Taking Advantage or Sharing It: An Alternative Approach to Power

Advent means "appearing" as in "God appearing"

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?

With leaders in political realm brazenly using power for their own advantage and daily revelations of men in power using that power to harass/abuse women…it's worth asking this Advent: *If God was one of us, a stranger on a bus, what would God do with power?*

<u>*Scientific American* on effectiveness of sexual harassment training</u>

Training about sexual harassment…is…geared to increase employees' attitudes about the seriousness of harassment and increase belief that the organization also takes it seriously. Unfortunately, research does not support these effects. Neither students nor working adults showed any change after training in their personal attitudes about harassment or their perceptions of organizational tolerance for it. One study showed that a brief training intervention produced a backlash such that men were more likely to blame a victim of sexual harassment than were those who did not receive the training. Ultimately, the "gold standard" for sexual harassment training is to reduce sexual harassment. To date, however, only one research study has looked at this outcome. And it found that the training was ineffective.

<u>Same article says 4 in 10 woman have experienced harassment in</u> the workplace in last two years…workplace won't be safe for women until women have equal power in the workplace.

We talk a lot about gaining power, wielding power, exercising power. And it's important to gain, wield, and exercise power.
We talk less about **sharing** power. God's realm will advance as those with power share it.

This advent Paul's letter to Philippians will be our guide.

<u>Key Philippians word is "sharing," Gk. koinonia</u>. Also means partnership and community. Rich word: what God enjoys within divine community (Father, Son, Spirit/Source,

Wellspring, Living Water). What God invites us into, what God wants to create on earth. MLK called it "beloved community"—the mark of which is sharing. Taking comes easy. Sharing, that's a more advanced thing.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, [4] not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. [Preamble to what scholars say is early Christian hymn, sung during celebration of what we call communion [koinonia) maybe in a chant form—sing it till you feel it so you can live it.]

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, [10] that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Question of divinity of Jesus is presented with much more nuance, subtlety and indirection in NT than it is say in Nicene Creed. Jewish scholar **Daniel Boyarin:** ancient Israel had a tradition a of second divine figure appearing alongside God. Jesus doesn't go around saying "I am God!" but he was aware of special divine connection

<u>In 2017 we are faced with a leader who brazenly boasts of his</u> power—his intelligence, strength, wealth, his sexual prowess—who uses the power of his office for personal advantage…and assumes we would all do the same if we had the opportunity.

<u>It's gross, but we have to acknowledge it's something our society</u> produced and rewarded. We all swim in sauce with this flavor. In Christian charismatic world—I saw this close up—a person can leverage their profound divine experiences to enhance personal

power. This world is crowded with leaders telling stories in which they are the hero—and it works, it enhances their prestige.

Jesus has a divine experience in his baptism. (*You are my son, in whom I am well pleased*). He is driven by the Spirit into the Judean wilderness to be tempted by Satan as a test. What is the temptation he faces there: To use his divine identity for personal advantage: *if you are the son of God, turn this bread into stone! Hurl yourself off a cliff and survive to wow the crowds!*

Some power we earn/work for. Write a lot, sing a lot, cook a lot, juggle a lot, you get better at it. Advantage you. Go with it.

But there's also power we're born into. Like wealth: Brooking Institution estimates 35-40 of wealth is inherited. Of course, we'd all rather think we earned whatever power we have. In our culture, inherited wealth is something we keep on the QT. We naturally overestimate earned power and underestimate unearned power. But that's fake news from LaLaLand.

I have friend who built a successful company from scratch—worked like mad for many years, took big risks, lots of grunt work, lots of stress. But he tells me that was only possible because he had access to start up capital: his dad loaned him $10,000. He built company from scratch, yes, but someone loaned him the scratch.

Biggest factor in whether a person slips into poverty or not: ready access to 2K loan from a family member. (Single parent 2 kids, living pay check to paycheck has her car die—works midnights, no busses, unless she can get car fixed, loses job)

I have this narrative that I grew up in a 2-bedroom bungalow house in Detroit, got married at 18, didn't get money from my parents for college. A self-made man! But I got help with the scratch too. Went to UM, but how did I get in, with 2.9 GPA. My dad was an alum and that gave me 2 legacy admission legacy points, the skin my teeth needed to get in by. How did I get a foothold in rising housing market in 1982, when I bought first house? A friend loaned me 10K and forgave half of it. Yes, I made it from scratch but I got help with the scratch!

I like to favorably compare my entrepreneurial no-frills, no pension, non-denomination ministry life with my wife's Episcopal world. (Social Security patterned after the Episcopal retirement fund, designed by JP Morgan, and Episcopalian). But that's not the whole story. About half of my modest by comparison self-funded retirement came from a book advance I got for two books I published with Thomas Nelson. How did I get that opportunity?
Evangelical publisher, I was part of an evangelical denomination. For many years that denomination wouldn't think of ordaining a woman to lead pastor role. So I had a gender advantage. I had a chance lead a moderately successful evangelical church. The CEO of Borders attended our church and became President of Thomas Nelson. When editor came to interview me about becoming Thomas Nelson author, Tami Heim came with him. In my head, Julia's Episcopal world conveys all this clergy advantage and that helps me to underestimate advantages I got in my world: not earned power but power gained by my race, gender, location, personal connections.

If we deny our unearned advantages—fail to recognize them or minimize them—we never even think to share our unearned advantage with others.

Jesus *"did not consider equality with God [pre-existing unearned advantage] something to be used to his own advantage; rather*, he
shared by giving it away, for the sake of those who didn't have what he always did

We won't share unearned advantage that we refuse to recognize: that's a powerful incentive not to recognize it. But we also don't get to participate in the divine storyline of Jesus who made the world a better place by sharing his.

Sociologists call unearned advantage "privilege" a word that wrankles most of us with privilege because it feels like it diminishes our hard work. Let me just say it: we get credit for our own work, we don't get credit for work we didn't do. If it turns out we over-estimate the credit due, it's time to recalibrate.

Are you sickened by a world—now being exposed for all to see, not just the women who experience it—a world were too many men in power have been given a free past to take advantage of women with less power? If you wanna fix it, be prepared to share some of your unearned power with women.

The lesson of the life of Jesus, is that to make a better world, people with unearned power have to share it, and there's no sharing it without giving some of it up.

Giving away power is not something we do at the urging of the more powerful, as part of their power accumulation schemes.

Giving away power is something we do when it is warranted to create a better world, a more just, hospitable-to-everyone world.

Giving away power, paradoxically, is the ultimate exercise of power.