

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**1 Sam. 17 Who Fights for You?**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 6/23/2024**

For now, I'm still stronger than my sons, by most measures  
of physical strength you want to come up with.

I know there will come a day when I will be  
at a distinct power disadvantage,  
probably sooner rather than later.

Back when they were infants, though, it was clear who had the power.  
They did.

Back in those early days, life revolved around the almighty diaper.

When it came time for diapers to be changed,  
it seemed they were suddenly possessed by some dancing demon  
which caused their hips to twist and spin in ways  
that were nearly impossible to predict.

When you add the fact that my sons had absolutely no fear of falling,  
nor respect regarding the contents of their diaper,  
my physical power advantage was relativized to the point  
where just keeping a kid on the changing table  
was a significant accomplishment.

The point being, power struggles come in different forms.  
Physical strength is only one form of power,  
and while impressive, it also tends to be one of the least  
effecting in the long run.

David Fitch is a missional theologian I deeply respect  
who has been writing about power and just wrote a book called  
*Reckoning with Power:*  
*Why the Church Fails When It's on the Wrong Side of Power.*

There are other more nuanced and philosophical discussions  
about power which are worth considering,  
but I appreciate the simplicity of Fitch's approach.

He looks at the categories of: power over, power under, and power with.

Power Over is the world's power in all its various forms.

Power Over is patriarchy, governmental authority, military might,  
school yard bullies, bosses, supervisors, teachers,  
police officers, and the like.

Whether wielded benevolently or wickedly,

Power Over is the power that humans control apart from God.

Fitch's contrast to Power Over is ... Power Under.

The Power Under perspective recognizes the sovereign power of God  
which humanity has no control over at all.

When Jesus gave the Great Commission he said,

“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.”

That means that we operate *under* the authority of Christ,  
which is very different from using power *over* others.

Last is the third category, Power With.

When God's supreme authority and power is released into the world,  
we, the Spirit-filled people of God,  
are invited to work *with* that power.

God's Spirit is *with us* as we face daily challenges and temptations,  
opportunities to join in loving our neighbors,

forgiving those who sin against us,  
standing in solidarity with those who are treated unjustly,  
and so on.

Here's a sentence from David Fitch which puts all three of these together.

He writes “all who enter into God's Kingdom,  
are called to live in submission to Christ, under His authority,  
[that's Power Under]  
resisting worldly power [we resist Power Over],  
becoming a conduit for His power.”

[that's Power With us and our neighbors as it is transmitted in the world.]

Now let's walk through this incredibly famous story about  
the clash between David and Goliath  
with special attention to how these categories of power  
show up.

The two nations of Israel and Philistia are preparing for battle on either side  
of the Valley of Elah.

As they are doing so, they clearly hate each other's guts,  
but they agree on the ground rules:

Brute force demonstrated through the actions  
of one army's hero versus the other army's hero  
will determine which nation is victorious.

This is ... Power Over.

*Both* Israel and Philistia are operating in a Power Over framework.

Within this framework, power belongs in the hands of the army  
with the best soldier, and the Philistines have Goliath.

Standing at 9 feet tall, he twirled his massive spear like a baton.

If an NBA draft took place in the ancient world,  
Goliath would be the #1 pick, a franchise  
cornerstone for years to come.

On the other side, another giant of sorts –

Saul, who you may remember stood head and shoulders  
above all the other Israelites when he was chosen as king.

But Saul was not rushing out to fight this Philistine brute.

After 40 days of shouting obscenities, intimidating, cursing the Lord,  
Goliath dominated imagination on *both* sides of the Valley of Elah.

The airwaves belonged to Goliath.

In Eugene Peterson's words,

**“Goliath—his size, his brutality, his cruelty—centered the world.  
Goliath was the polestar around which  
everyone else took bearings.”** Power over.

ENTER DAVID: God's chosen one, filled with the Spirit of God,  
a musician, and precious to Saul.

Last week I noted that God's choice of David –  
a young shepherd boy whose father Jesse *didn't even invite*  
to meet the prophet Samuel – foreshadowed the Apostle Paul's  
declaration that God chose the foolish things of the world  
to shame the wise; God chose the weak things  
of the world to shame the strong.  
Samuel choosing David at Yahweh's insistence  
is an example of Power Under.

There's something of the logic of Jesus at work here  
in these ancient stories of Yahweh and Israel – and for good reason:  
Jesus is Yahweh in the flesh.

Continuing that thread, I think we can see the way Jesus engaged with power  
foreshadowed here and there in David's reckoning with power.

Earlier in the story we learned that in the halls of Saul's palace,  
David's Spirit filled music had restored and healed Saul's mood  
in a way that none other could. (That's Power With.)

And so David, anointed by Samuel to **be king**, but not yet announced  
as such to the masses arrives *as a servant*—with roasted grain  
10 loaves of bread and 10 cheeses for his brothers  
and the commander of their unit.

In verses 25-26, David checks things out ...

“What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes  
this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine  
that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

And he is told that he'll receive great wealth and the king's daughter  
for a wife, *and* his family won't have to pay taxes. Not bad.

But while speaking to these men, his brothers – ignoring the gift of food –  
accuse David of having a wicked heart.

They say he's only there to watch the battle.

His eldest brother Eliab ridicules him saying,

“With whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness?”

His brothers don't see his kindness, but treat him as a distraction.

In fact, their inability to see David in any other way  
underlines the way they see the world.

Consider: Have you known anyone who is unable to look past  
the surface realities of size and strength?

From this perspective, a curious shepherd boy had no business  
leaving his sheep to come watch.

But David refuses to see the situation  
through a Goliath dominated imagination.

*David refuses to see the situation through a Power Over imagination.*

God chose David because his heart operated on a different logic,  
a Power Under logic.

But the story, like almost all OT stories, is not entirely clean cut.

After talking with his brothers, he asks yet another person  
what will happen for the person who slays Goliath.

He already got the information once. Why ask again?

Is David self-interested? Is he being tempted here?

Imagine that you're hearing the story for the first time ...  
don't you think the author is making us wonder  
about David's potential for weakness?

At the very least, we know that David was aware of a reward,  
and he wasn't shying away from it.

But what shines out brighter than his awareness of reward  
is his disgust at the dishonor the whole situation is bringing on Israel,  
and therefore on the Lord.

In spite of his youth,  
he will fight for the honor of Yahweh,  
trusting that victory will be provided at his hands.

The fact that David rejects the ground rules that Israel and Philistia  
had set up is demonstrated when he's offered *Saul's armor*.

He tries to put it on, but it doesn't fit him.

As David puts it, "I'm not used to wearing this."

This is another symbol of the power dynamics at work here –  
David's physical being rejects the Power Over paradigm  
that he's being thrust into.

He's not going to conform to the expectations of his brothers and Saul.  
He will go at this his own way, which is the same way  
he dealt with challenges earlier in life –  
through reliance on the Lord.

v. 37, **“The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion  
and the paw of the bear will rescue me  
from the hand of this Philistine.”**

David was focused on God with him.  
This is where we see that this is not really a story about  
the armies of two nations, and it's not really a story  
about the courage of a young boy –  
it's a story about God.

Do we see our lives as being lived under the power of a God  
whose love is with us?  
Or do we see ourselves seeking power over  
a world that challenges us?  
The difference is not always that easy to perceive.

So David enters into the Valley of Elah,  
and kneels down by the stream to select five smooth stones.  
Doesn't say he kneels, but to choose stones you have to.

Kneeling and searching.

In the face of a vicious opponent,  
this is a posture of considerable vulnerability.

David's rudimentary inventory invites taunts from Goliath.  
“Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?”

It strikes me that Goliath sees David just as David's older brothers did.

David rises and runs.

Goliath laughs.

Saul is distraught with worry.

Two, three twirls, and Goliath is struck down.

David then kills Goliath with his own sword, and cuts off his head.

It's a gruesome, bloody outcome. David didn't say,

“Hey big guy – I know you've always been misunderstood.

You are a tool for the empire, a symbol of brutality,

but I also know that your mother loves you,

and that your Creator loves you, too.

Do you think that in another life the two of us could have been friends?

Let's grab a wheel of cheese and talk this out.”

That's not the way the story goes.

Even so, it's clear that David did not fight

as one who depends on power over others

through the ways of the world.

He responded to God's call as one who stands under

the power of the Almighty, and it was *God's power with David*

that delivered in the victory.

Who fights for you? Who is your hope in your world, today?

A modern-day Goliath who promises the world on a platter?

(Goliaths come in many different disguises these days.)

Or the Living God who created all things,

knows you intimately, and loves you eternally?

You have the same choice that David had.

You are also presented with ill-fitting armor from the world

and are asked to participate in exerting Power Over

*them* (whoever *they* may be in your community.)

Here's the truth: That is a temptation to serve the world rather than the Lord.

Resist it. Stand under the perfect, loving, and good will of our Creator.

Or as Jesus put it, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God.”