

SERMON -
TO MOVE MOUNTAINS

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PLYMOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

I sat in front of my television set and I hear him say it: "We want black power". I remember he said it several times, each time with more emotion and determination than before. It seems that I said to myself then, "Lord, help him to use it right when he gets it", and, like those standing in the crowd, I too added my "Amen." Then I promptly forgot the whole incident.

Suddenly, it's staring me in the face again. From the front page of the morning paper: "NAACP condemns demand for "black power"; "Humphrey Against Black Power". Suddenly men and women who had worked side by side, suffering and dying for a common cause, were hurling violent accusations at each other. Men who had risked their reputations, even their lives, now turned and fled from this nasty phrase "black power". The question this mass flight raises in my mind is "Are we faced with a golden calf fashioned to lead those in search of the promised land of equality astray?" Or have we finally arrived at that day of judgement when the strong shall be separated from the weak? But the most important question is, "Where must I, as a Christian, take my stand"?

We are confronted with a conflict very similar to that mentioned by Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth. I admit that the problem was not central in any of his letters, but his brief mention of it is enough to let us know that it is not peculiar to our situation. I am speaking specifically of one phrase "If I have the faith to move mountains and have not love, I am nothing". The conflict is there; it is underlying Paul's thought: If I have, and I would rather say here, the power to move mountains, and have not love, I am nothing.

For some strange reason, men have always paid lip service to the great value of love, and to the inherent evil of power. Yet, history can be told as the endless quest for power; the never ending search for the ability to either force, persuade or trick others into behavior patterns not of their own choosing.

This is power! The raw fact is that power enables he who possesses it to make others do what he desires them to do. This is what frightens us about it. Add to this the hint of violence, and the near panic seen this past week in Los Angeles is the result.

And we have a right to fear such a combination. Did not this marriage of force and political power plunge the whole world into armed conflict from which we have yet to recover? Has not this combination held the south in its grip for almost three centuries? Would not Medgar Evers, Lemuel Penn and many, many others be alive today if this marriage had never taken place? Any political power that is rooted in force, even if it is great enough to move whole mountains, is demonic and corruptive, be it white, black or green. It is, in the metaphysical terminology of the late Paul Tillich, the manifestation of the destructive power of non-being. It is the negation of life itself. It reduces human beings to mere pawns on a chess board, or statistics on a casualty list. So and so number

of Viet Cong were killed in operation 384. We forget that these are people who are dead, not flies. This is the corruptive influence of power without love. And if this is what is meant by "black power;" I must stand, violently, if necessary, opposed to it.

But what of love without power? I am afraid that, while we might over the long run be able to move the mountain of hate and prejudice out of the way, we simply don't have the time for that. We have preached the subtle power of love from Negro pulpits for many years now. We have seen it work in the civil rights activities of the past. But now, with the new laws for which we fought so hard being disregarded each day; now, with the last hurdle -- housing -- almost sure to stump us; now, with a new generation which has known little else but poverty and police brutality -- now, I fear this message has very little meaning. Love is ideal; few would deny that. But the ultimatum issued in Watts I and II, in Harlem and Rochester and Chicago is not for interracial love, but for human justice. And the realization of justice, no matter how one looks at it, demands power. It demands that a heretofore invisible people become obvious. That the non-existent man be felt. It is interesting that one youth, when asked why the Watts riot had taken place answered "It was the only way to make whitey see us". Of course he was wrong, there was another way: black power. A voice "downtown". A voice that is heard downtown. That's all. The authorities knew that riot was coming. They were told many times by many men. But that voice was not heard. Watts had no power, until that match was struck. Then. Then the whole world knew they were there.

Malcolm Boyd says the same thing, a bit differently, in a prayer for racial justice. He asks the central question: Is what God wants going to make any difference in what all of us are going to do?

The question must never become "Will we lose some white support. We will. We will lose those who desire to paternalistically give us small advances, but ever keeping us just a bit below. We will lose them. But we will keep those who are sincerely working to do God's will, to bring about a society where all men are treated as men, where love is a possibility. The question must never become "Is black power anti-white power"? because to some it will always be. It will also be against some of us. Those who are working against a just society, who profit from discrimination and segregation. Whenever there is a mountain to be moved, there will be those who like it the way it is.

The real question is "once we get this power, what will we do with it"? Will we further hate and separation? I pray not. Will we seek vengeance for years of being wronged? I pray not. These are the real dangers of black power, not these mentioned in the news media. The danger is not that black power is anti-white, but that it will become anti-human. That it will lose all traces of the love that paved the road to realization. The danger is that we will set out to move mountains, having in our hands the power to do so, but without love. Then we are nothing. My prayer is still "Lord, help him use it right when he gets it."