

Gentle Power

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
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Redlands First United Methodist Church

I was inclined to discuss Noah's Ark tonight, after this week of rain. However, I do admit that I have found special joy in singing, "It came upon a Midnight *Clear*."

We've been surrounded by gorgeous Christmas Carols sung by our Sanctuary Choir and each other, too. I have this season been wondering, are the words to these Carols merely innocuous sound-bites? Or, do these beautiful carols that tell the story of Jesus' birth proclaim a message about *power*?

In two days, on Sunday morning, we will sing, "The First Noel." As we sing, we'll declare "born is the *king* of Israel." We have sung tonight of "Peace on the earth." We sing that "good will for all" was announced from the heavens. We sing that Christ rules the world and "makes the nations prove the wonders of his love . . ." We will close tonight singing *Silent Night*, about Jesus as "Holy *infant*, who was *tender and mild*," yet who was also "*lord* at his birth"? **Such a juxtaposition of images of power!**

Shepherds were a despised occupation. The baby Jesus was placed in a feeding trough. This is NOT a story about powerful people. Yet, it is very much a story about power!

Look at us tonight. We are gathered together with high expectations, with wonder and with love. Think about millions of people around the earth just like us marveling and worshipping 20 centuries after the events occurred. This story about power has staying power!

This "mild savior" was some powerful king! The "**Saving Power" of the grown up Christ was unmistakably a "Gentle Power."**

How different was his power from the power that was prevalent at the time he was born! In that world *hard power* dominated. Emperors ruled. Armies killed. Consider the amazing influence of this man who was so transparent to God that even though he did not have an army and had only a few disciples, though he did not try to rule or to dominate any group of persons, what he unveiled for the world has transformed billions of people--even us.

His power "Gentle." He cared for people. He engaged with foreigners. He empowered people to be made whole. Stories tell us that he didn't stay meek and mild *every day* between babyhood and being the grown-up Christ. Yet, through all the stories about his relationships that he held onto gentle power.

One way to express our personal power is to say clearly, "I want." Think of children who wrote letters to Santa this year. Some probably began, "I want." That's using their power in a gutsy way. It's gutsy because what if they don't get what they want? What if there's a big gap between their want and what they receive? Surely some children were more cautious, especially this year, writing something like, "Maybe you could bring me this, if it is possible."

Jesus the Rabbi communicated not only what he wanted, but what he believed God wanted! It's a curious question, isn't it, "What does God want for Christmas?" I do NOT think that the Divine Power of the Universe avoids naming precise wants. I don't imagine God declaring/thinking/saying (or whatever God does): "I want

you to find balance and wholeness in your life--or not.” “I want you to find out what you, uniquely have to offer the world--or not.” “You all could find creative solutions to conflict--or not.”

Rather, I think God risks communicating a big and clear “I Want.” **Christ communicated God’s desires with gentle clarity and power:** “I want you to face the person you call ‘stranger’ and find a precious human being.” “I want you--all of you--to be whole.” “I want you to know that you are of value, as you are.” I want you to love. God is sticking God’s neck out here, being vulnerable, naming wants right and left!

In the world of nature and human relationships, there are all sorts of storms and crises. In this world no trouble-free existence is promised. Yet, the vast numbers of illnesses heal. Over time people tend to forget why we are angry at each other. After floods and mud slides, waters subside, we rebuild and restore, and we help each other.

It sure seems as if “Shalom”--which means wholeness, health and peace all combined--is truly a power that keeps on giving, persistently, gently. God does not force even peaceful solutions upon us, but has created a world in which joy keeps trumping sadness, a world in which the most effective power was once a movie title, *Friendly Persuasion*.

“It came upon a midnight clear?” What came? **A ruler who gained power through love.** A ruler who was very clear about how effective power really works. **The power of true love puts courage in the heart.**

I understand that there is a political theory called “soft power”ⁱ and that this approach is found to be the most effective power in international relationships. (You can *Google*, “soft power” to read about this approach.) I’m glad that political theory has finally caught up with Christ!

Tonight, I hope that you make this Christmas message personal. Think about where and how *you* can benefit from more personal, and gentle, power. As you snuggle into bed, allow visions of gentle powerfulness to dance in your head. If communication is tripping you up, imagine clearly expressing yourself in your relationships, with gentleness and power. If daily work is a challenge, imagine yourself going about your work with personal power that is gentle and clear.

What ‘saves’ the world--what Christ embodied--is mutual empowerment, gentle power, the ability both to influence another AND to let ourselves be influenced by others. The power to receive others into our lives, to let others make a difference to us, is an indication of our strength, not our weakness.

Christmas *requires* candles and carols, for we are celebrating the “wonders of God’s Love,” love so striking that people really came to believe that there could be, in reality, not just in their dreams, “Peace on earth, good will to all.”

ⁱ **Soft power** is a term used in [international relations](#) theory to describe the ability of a [political](#) body, such as a [state](#), to indirectly influence the behavior or [interests](#) of other political bodies through [cultural](#) or [ideological](#) means. The term was first coined by [Harvard University professor Joseph Nye](#), who remains its most prominent proponent, in a [1990](#) book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He further developed the concept in his 2004 book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. While its usefulness as a descriptive theory has not gone unchallenged, soft power has since entered popular political discourse as a way of distinguishing the subtle effects of culture, values and ideas on others' behavior from more direct coercive measures, such as [military](#) action ([hard power](#)) or [economic](#) incentives. Unlike [Hard Power](#), Soft Power is persuasive as opposed to commanding. Instead of being forced (hard power) a nation or individual willingly absorbs a Nation or individual’s way of thinking. Soft Power arguably gained success for the USA through it's globally released Hollywood films.

[edit] Definition The basic concept of **power** is the ability to influence others to get them to do what you want. There are three major ways to do that: one is to threaten them with sticks; the second is to pay them with carrots; the third is to attract them

or co-opt them, so that they want what you want. If you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, it costs you much less in carrots and sticks. [1]

Soft power, then, represents the third way of getting the outcomes you want. Soft power is contrasted with [hard power](#), which has historically been the predominant [realist](#) measure of national power, through [quantitative metrics](#) such as [population](#) size, concrete [military](#) assets, or a nation's [Gross Domestic Product](#). But having such resources does not always produce the desired outcomes as the United States discovered in the Vietnam War. The resources from which soft power behavior is derived are culture (when it is attractive to others), values (when there is no hypocrisy in their application) and foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others). Unless these conditions are present, culture and ideas do not necessarily produce the attraction that is essential for soft power behavior. The extent of attraction can be measured by public opinion polls, by elite interviews, and case studies. Nye argues that soft power is more than influence, since influence can also rest on the hard power of threats or payments. And soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument, though that is an important part of it. It is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acquiescence.

If I am persuaded to go along with your purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place — in short, if my behavior is determined by an observable but intangible attraction — soft power is at work. Soft power uses a different type of currency — not force, not money — to engender cooperation. It uses an attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values. [2]

The success of soft power heavily depends on the actor's [reputation](#) within the [international community](#), as well as the flow of information between actors. Thus, soft power is often associated with the rise of [globalization](#) and [neoliberal international relations](#) theory. [Popular culture](#) and [media](#) is regularly identified as a source of soft power, as is the spread of a national [language](#), or a particular set of [normative](#) structures; a nation with a large amount of soft power and the good will that engenders it inspire others to [acculturate](#), avoiding the need for expensive [hard power](#) expenditures.

'Hard Power' is a term describing power obtained from the utilisation of military and/or economic power to influence the behaviour or interests of other political bodies. As the name would suggest, this form of political power is often aggressive, and is most effective when used by one political body by another of lesser military and/or economic power.

[edit] Original Definition

Hard power is a term used in [international relations](#). Hard power is a theory that describes using [military](#) and [economic](#) means to influence the behavior or interests of other political bodies. It is used in contrast to [soft power](#), which refers to power that comes from [diplomacy](#), [culture](#) and [history](#).

Hard power lies at the command end of the spectrum of behaviours and describes a [nation's](#) ability to coerce or induce another [nation](#) to perform a course of action. This can be done through [military power](#) which consists of [coercive diplomacy](#), [war](#) and [alliance](#) using threats and force with the aim of coercion, [deterrence](#) and protection. Alternatively [economic power](#) can be used which relies on [aid](#), [bribes](#) and [economic sanctions](#) in order to induce and coerce. Example: "Mr. Kindleburger often uses hard power in the classroom, upon his students. He often scolds them and threatens them with detentions daily." Hard power is often threatening.