

Fight the Power
The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
January 10, 2016

Let me hear you say:
"Fight the power."

That's how it goes, the chorus.

So, you can do it.

Let me hear you say:
"Fight the Power."

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"Fight the Power."

That's the chorus of Public Enemy's song, *Fight the Power*, one of the most important and influential performances of that era. The song came out in 1990, and I'm not going to perform it, but I want to read you parts of it, for those who don't know it by heart.

While the Black bands sweatin'
And the rhythm rhymes rollin'
Got to give us what we want
Gotta give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death
We got to fight the powers that be

To revolutionize make a change nothin's strange
People, people we are the same
No we're not the same
'Cause we don't know the game

What we need is awareness, we can't get careless
Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps
Sample a look back you look and find
Nothing but rednecks for four hundred years if you
check
Don't worry be happy
Was a number one jam
Damn if I say it you can slap me right here

...

Power to the people no delay
To make everybody see
In order to fight the powers that be

Some folks act like the protest movement of
#blacklivesmatter is new. It isn't. It's a new moment
and title, but when Public Enemy released this song, on
the album entitled "Fear of a Black Planet" there was a
firestorm of controversy. In the longer video, they
ridiculed the kumbaya approach to racial justice,
they called out police violence against communities of
color, they took an aggressive stance for black
nationalism and pride and "mental self-defense
fitness."

"If I say 'don't worry be happy' you can slap me right
here."

Let me hear you say:
"Fight the power."

Public Enemy's song riffed from an earlier song - one
from 1975, the height of the Black Power movement -
by the Isley Brothers, a song by the same name.

A portion of which goes like this:

Got so many voices, saying all the same, yeah,
Killing up all around me, faces full of pain
I tried to play my music, they say my music's too loud
I tried talking about it, I got the big runaround
And when I rolled with the punches I got knocked on
the ground
By all this [nonsense] going down,
Time is truly wastin', there's no guarantee,
Smile is in the makin', we got to fight the powers that
be

Nonsense is not the word they sing, by the way.
There's a common thread here:
I tried to talk about the injustice of the world, I tried to
sing about it, and I got knocked down.
So we need to fight the power.
We have to resist.

Resist empire, and colonization, and oppression, and
violence, and injustice.

And resistance is hard. Empire is tempting.
Don't worry be happy was a number one jam, and you
can get famous and make lots of money if you
cooperate with empire. Be a token, be a good boy, a
good girl -
"respectability politics" it is called - and it's easy.

It even happens to people after their death. Next week
is Martin Luther King, Jr. day, and when we talk about
King, we usually suffer from powerful historical
amnesia.

It took a long time to create a holiday, because when King was killed, he was reviled by most White Americans.

We talk now about “the content of their character” and how he preached non-violence. But we forget that he condemned war, that he supported organized labor, that he pushed and pulled and marched and preached for a deeper change.

We forget that he said words like this:

The white liberal must rid himself of the notion that there can be a tensionless transition from the old order of injustice to the new order of justice.... The Negro has not gained a single right in America without persistent pressure and agitation....

We must resist.

We must resist historical amnesia and the temptations of empire. And, if it is easy for people who are oppressed by empire to give in and sing songs of cooperation, how much easier is it for those of us who mostly benefit from the privileges of empire?

As Nikki says, we get to pick our battles.

For full-fledged citizens of the oppressive state, for those who received, or whose ancestors received, the ill-gotten gains of slavery, land and wage-theft, access to power and freedom from state-sponsored violence, how much easier is it for us to slip into our lane and cooperate with the powers that be. To avoid the call of resistance.

So easy.

So tempting.

But, we must resist.

Why?

Because it what our faith, the call of love, demands of us.

We must resist because our faith gives us a larger vision

of what human life is for, what we are supposed to do with this one wild and precious life.

We are supposed to resist because the we wish to live in the sun, and not as enemies of all that is life and joy;

we are supposed to resist because, in the end, the life of resistance is worthy of praise and the life of compliance is unremarkable.

We are supposed to resist because love sounds an echo in our soul, what though the darkness `round me close,
songs in the night it giveth.

I suspect that you already know this.

You are here in this hall, on this cold and wintery day, because you long to resist the seduction and the pain of empire. Because you wish for a life of more meaning.

You come to the Unitarian Universalist Church because you know there is something more than going along to get along. There is more than buy and consume and do it again. You are here because you do not wish to be, in Auden's words, the Unknown Citizen, found by

the Bureau of Statistics to be One against whom there was no official complaint;

was he free? was he happy? The question is absurd. We wish for more than this.

We come here because we want more in our life and in the lives of others:

we long for a world of justice and mercy, for an end to oppression and violence. This is the Unitarian Universalist church, and this is what we are about.

Empire, here, means many things:

it means the use of violence and control to create hierarchies around race, wealth, gender, and place of birth.

It means vulture capitalism and white supremacy, and it means a kind of deadness in the face of mystery and wonder.

It means ecological destruction and short-term profits. It means the military-industrial complex and political disenfranchisement.

It is one piece, a hydra, a labyrinth of interlocking systems.

And we choose, as best we can, to resist.

To resist.

So the question on your mind, I suspect, isn't so much "why" should we resist empire, but how.

We agree, I think: we should.

But how?

How, when all that must be resisted is so powerful?

This, thankfully, is a question with an answer - an answer tried and tested through millennia of practice in the resistance of empire - for as long as there has been empire, there has been resistance.

Our ability to resist depends on two interconnected sources of power and wisdom, namely: conscience and community.

Conscience - the ability, the practice, of thinking and feeling a sense of justice and truth.

Community - to be in connection with others of conscience, to hear and feel their stories and lives.

Conscience takes training and focus.

Oh, I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom.

What a great song, a spiritual, a song that enslaved Africans would sing to remind themselves of the goal: freedom.

To resist.

You need to stay your mind on freedom. For yourself and for others. Put your focus on the goal.

Every day, wake up with your mind stayed on freedom. Train your conscience. Listen to the deeper voice within:

"No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging." Cling to the rock: of love, of freedom, of justice.

For those whose bodies are in constant danger from empire, the task to keep your mind stayed on freedom is both more fraught and more obvious.

For those who sometimes appear to benefit from empire,
we have to work extra-hard to train our conscience —
to question authority, to wonder if things are right and
fair, to be troubled by our conscience.
To develop, on purpose, a feeling of being maladjusted
to the system. King said, “there are some things to
which we should be maladjusted.”
And if we’re not, then our conscience needs work.

How do you train your conscience?
You ask questions. You study. You learn. You do
spiritual practice. Part of the way empire works in our
world today
is through distraction. Look at this outrage of the
moment! Now, look at this video of cats being cute!
Oh, quick, look at this weather report! Oh, now look at
this thing to buy! Is the dress blue and black or white
and gold?! Distraction.
And that’s OK for a little bit.
But it can suck you in and make you comfortably
numb.

The solution is spiritual practice.
Take time to do something that centers your soul
and allows your conscious to speak to you.
Pray.
Write in a journal.
Walk.
Sit still and meditate.
Sing one of your favorite hymns.
Come to worship.
Go to your small group gathering.
Let that song rise in you.

This is one of the pillars of the ability to resist.

The second is community.

People with whom you share the journey and the struggle.

People with whom you can be honest and learn from and share with.

People who are resisting empire.

You'll hear more about this next week, about what it means to be a follower, a disciple, in the journey of justice. But the moral imagination comes alive through authentic community.

"When friends rejoice both far and near . . .

to prison cell and dungeon vile
our thoughts to them are winging.

when friends by shame are undefiled."

Many stones form an arch. Singly none; singly none.

I am inspired and strengthened in my efforts to resist the power of empire every day by the power of community.

My colleagues in ministry, who share their successes and failures; the activists and teachers and prophets of both history and today, who I read and see do extraordinary things, though they are ordinary people; and you.

You.

The people of this church.

Who show up to tutor and serve a meal, who come to the meetings and the rallies, who write letters and make calls and don't give up, who try to raise your children with inclusive love, who are moved by compassion and open your hearts - - you inspire me, strengthen me, in my attempts to resist empire.

For this I adore you; because of this I am so lucky to be your minister.

Community.

We cannot resist empire by ourselves. What can they do to you? Anything they want. But with four you can start an organization. It goes on. It starts when you say *We* and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more.

Prophecy, my people, let your voice be the echo of the outcries of the oppressed.

To be in authentic community is to be inspired, to be comforted, to learn, to form networks of solidarity, to have pie with seconds, to grow our moral imagination.

To be people of compassion, people who are not jerks.

Conscience and Community are related:

con-science actually means with-knowing, to know with others - so community informs our conscience.

And conscience, being centered and hearing the song of the deeper love, pulls us toward one another, gives us the capacity to forgive and love again, moves us to genuine connection, makes community more than friendship:

makes it justice; not a collection of individuals, but the *beloved* community.

That's how we resist.

That's how we resist empire.

In beloved community, with consciences that are alive and active.

That's what it takes to stand outside the temptations and distractions, to fight the powers that be, to sing a song of justice and love.

That's what it takes to fight.

But it's more than that. Here's the good news.

What it takes to fight the power - beloved, conscience-filled community - what it takes to fight the empire, is exactly what we want to replace the empire with.

It is the vision of the new world!

The practice of working for justice is the enactment of the world we long for. That's good news!

We cannot use the master's tools to destroy the master's house. We cannot destroy empire with another empire -

it's been tried and it doesn't work.

Our resistance must be grounded in the spiritual vision of peace — the love for all humanity, for other beating hearts, and for lands of sunlight everywhere.

What it takes to resist - a deep love for one another, in our fullness, and love for ourselves, in our fullness, a love for peace - what it takes to resist is the world we wish to see.

In our very act of resistance, in our very act of fighting the power, we are creating the new and more beautiful world.

So, let me hear you say:

"Fight the power!"

Let me hear you say:
"Fight the power."

May our conscience be strong.

May our community be beloved.

May we have the courage and the love to dream and
work for a better world for all its inhabitants.

May the way we resist be the way we wish to live.

May the way we live be a way of resistance,
a way of beauty, and a way of peace.

May it be so this day and every day.

And may we now, with the dream of peace and justice
alive in our heart, rise in body and/or spirit and sing
together.