

These Windows Can Speak: The Sequel
Part 1: Powerful Gentleness
Reflections on Stewart Wheler and
Six Generations of Family Life and Serve at Knox Church
Text: Luke 8:37
Preached by Bruce D. Ervin
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Perhaps you heard the story on the news last week about the American Airlines flight which was winging its way from San Francisco to Chicago. The co-pilot became sick and couldn't carry out his duties. So the pilot came on the PA system and said, "Ah, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We have reached our cruising altitude of 30,000 feet, estimated time of arrival into Chicago's O'Hare International Airport is 5:00 central time. Oh, by the way, our First Officer has become ill. If there is anyone on board with a pilot's license, please join me in the cockpit. Have a pleasant flight."

Well, there *was* someone on board with a pilot's license: the *stewardess*. So she eased into the right hand seat on the flight deck and as they approached Chicago she helped the captain navigate perhaps the busiest airspace in the world.

Sometimes you have to take responsibility. Sometimes you have to recognize that you have the gifts to handle a particular situation, and then you have to take the initiative and do it!

Kind of like Jesus in today's gospel story. He and the disciples had just arrived on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. You'll recall how they'd set out from the Galilee side, and while sailing across they got caught in a storm. Jesus had calmed the storm – using his great power he had calmed the storm – and the Disciples were afraid in the presence of such power. Now they're in the country of the Gerasenes, on the opposite shore. As soon as Jesus stepped out of the boat, he was met by a man who was possessed with a *mess* of demons. I mean, this dude was in sad shape! And he'd been that way for a *long* time. We're not told how long, but I've always had the impression that it was like *years*; maybe *decades*. And no one had been able to cure him. Now, you have to remember that in Jesus' time, faith healers were a dime a dozen. There were all sorts of people running around the countryside and healing people. You'd think that over all those years, someone would've been able to help this poor guy.

Apparently not. Sometimes it's easier to avoid a problem than to confront it. So all of the healers kept avoiding this man. Too big a problem to tackle. Maybe if we keep ignoring it, it will go away.

Jesus, on the other hand, seizes the opportunity. Sizing up the situation, he quickly dispatches that legion of demons into a herd of pigs. Now the pigs are possessed and they run headlong into the sea, killing themselves and the demons in one fell swoop. In one masterstroke of power, Jesus has solved three problems at the same time. He's healed the man, dispatched the demons and

wiped out a bunch of dirty pigs. Because, you see, if you're a good Jew, it's bad news to have pigs around.

Jesus had demonstrated great power. And the people were afraid. The disciples were afraid when Jesus calmed the storm and the people were afraid when Jesus healed the demoniac. There is a common theme here: people are afraid of power. So afraid that sometimes they'll try almost anything to avoid using it. Yes, it *is* easier to avoid a problem than to deal with it; in the short term. But in the long term, that just makes the problem worse.

Stewart Wheler was not one to avoid problems. No, Stew Wheler was one to seize the opportunity; to put his gifts to good use; to use his power for the common good.

Stew was the fourth generation of a now six generation family which has been part of Knox Church since its very beginning. And the window which we are reflecting on today was given to the church by Stew and his wife Helen in honour of all six of those generations.

The window reflects power; in a subtle kind of way. As you look at the scene, your eye is immediately drawn to two things: the lamb, and the Flag of the Crusaders. That flag, snapping crisply in the breeze, makes me think of a hot day in early July nearly 150 years ago. Your American neighbours were engaged in a bloody Civil War. Confederate troops had been discovered just west of the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The First Corp of the Union's Army of the Potomac, moving north from Washington D.C., heard gunfire to the northwest. With military precision they wheeled to their left and began marching across a field to meet the enemy. As they did so, they unfurled their flags: regimental banners and battle flags catching the wind as fife and drum played the troops into battle. No fear of power here. It was an *awesome* show of strength as the Union Army struck a blow against slavery. With banners waving on the wind, power confronted power as those blue-clad boys fought for a new birth of freedom.

The window draws your eye toward that crusader flag. But it draws your eye as well to something else: a lamb. It there's power depicted here, it's a gentle power: the gentleness of a lamb, and the gentle power of the Lamb of God, who is Jesus the Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Perhaps the lamb brings to mind the notion of gentle Jesus, meek and mild. And yes, Jesus was gentle in the sense that he never used a weapon to kill an opponent. But his was a *powerful* gentleness. Such was his power that without having to resort to violence, he confronted irresponsibility, he confronted arrogance, he confronted evil. As such he was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Powerful gentleness. That's what I think of when I think of Stew Wheler. His gentleness was evident in his outgoing and easy manner with people. On my first Sunday here at Knox, Stew as the first person to greet me. I'd already met the Search Committee, of course, but apart from those folks, Stew as the first

person to greet me. He reached out his hand and he said, "Hi, I'm Stew Wheler." And almost immediately we were talking as if we'd known each other for years. A gentle-man in the best sense of that word.

But there was *power* in his gentleness. He was a tall man, and that kind of physical presence sometimes translates into power. He was not reticent to get involved in things, and in that sense there was the power to get things done. He could be persuasive without you really knowing that you were being persuaded until after you'd said, "Yes." And while this teacher and school administrator had retired by the time I got to know him, I'll bet he could be quite persuasive with students and colleagues alike. A gentle man, to be sure; but *powerfully* gentle. Stew Wheler was not afraid to seize the opportunity and use his power.

But a lot of folks *are* afraid of power. So afraid that in some situations they'd rather appease evil than confront it. Look again at that Crusader's Flag. There's a cross on it. Does anyone know who's cross that is? It's the cross of a particular saint... Yes, it's the Cross of St. George.

Let me tell you the story of St. George and the Dragon. Or at least one version of the story. Like all good myths, there's more than one version.

Long ago and far away there was this town. And one day a dragon appeared on the scene and he threatened to destroy the town. But the people cut a deal with him. The dragon said that he would spare the town if on one day each year they would give him a child to eat. So on that day the town's people would grab one of the town's children, and leave him or her by the seashore, and the dragon would eat the kid.

The beast may've lived by the sea, but this was hardly Puff the Magic Dragon! Little Jackie Paper would've been in big trouble if we met *this* dragon!

This went on for years. Year after year the evil dragon was appeased by the sacrifice of a little child. Now if the whole town had gotten together they probably could've ganged up on the dragon and killed the rascal! But no one wanted to seize the initiative, no one wanted to use their power, no one wanted to organize the community and confront the evil in their midst. It was easier in the short-term to simply appease the evil dragon. The alternative of using their power to confront him was just too scary. They were afraid of their own power.

Then one day St. George came along. Of course, he wasn't *St. George* yet, but anyway this guy named George came to town. The man knew how to use a sword. So he listened to the people as they told him about the dragon, and he assessed the situation, and he decided that he had to do something.

The next time the dragon came to call, he expected to find another little kid waiting for him on the beach. Instead, he found St. George. And St. George killed that dragon, and the town's folk lived happily ever after.

Evil grows when good people choose to do nothing. Reinhold Niebuhr said something like that once. People often try to be nice in order to appease the evil one who would do harm. Fearing the use of power, they fail to confront evil.

But the only way to deal with evil is to confront it with something that is more powerful still. The power that destroys has to be met with the power of love.

How ironic that we sometimes fear the power to do good more than we fear the power of evil. Perhaps you'll recall what Nelson Mandela said about that. He said that our greatest fear isn't that we are powerless. Our greatest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. Because, you see, we are. We are powerful beyond measure. The Bible says that God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power (2 Timothy 1:7). *You* have been given a spirit of power. We, collectively, have been given a spirit of power. Stew Wheeler, following Jesus, modeled for us a way to use that power gently, but effectively. Jesus said that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him (Matthew 28:18). He, in turn, offered that authority and power to the church. Trust it, and use it! Amen.