



# Every Family Empowered

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“**F**at Body” (his street name) is an empowered young man. His story began on the streets of Chicago, living in public housing, sometimes going to a Lutheran church for youth activities. He describes his empowerment like this: “When I was in Chicago with the gangbangers, I didn’t know who I was. I thought the power was outside of me. I know now that the power is inside—that God is inside of me—and I only have to look inside to connect with that.” When I ask him how he got that way, he tells me, “You and Pastor Kelly and Babette helped me experience who I really was by not doing it for me. I didn’t know who I was. I thought I was what other people thought of me. I was wrong.” This is the raw essence of empowerment: being in a relationship that uplifts and accepts us as we are but loves us too much to leave us unchanged—the same way that God empowers us with grace.

But this is not just a “streets of Chicago” narrative. God is seeking to empower all of us, to liberate us from the thinking of this world that tells us who we need to be, who we need to please in order to be successful, a world that keeps us bound up in the *incurvatus in se* (curved in on self) that Luther warned us about.

Our vision at Redeemer Center for Life, a faith-based nonprofit in urban Minneapolis, is this:

As an agent of hope and transformation, Redeemer Center for Life will preserve a vibrant community in which every child is supported, each family empowered, and all neighbors encouraged to grow, thrive and contribute to their fullest potential.

*God calls us to be empowered and to share that empowerment with others, because that is what God has done for us. Empowerment is basic to both social work and pastoral care.*

A lofty vision, but how does “each family empowered” look in reality? Empowerment is a buzzword that has no distinct definition but is used by many different disciplines, including theology. Can one empower a family in a few easy steps? Try typing “empowerment” into an Internet search engine and see the vast array of products and philosophies that pop up. As people of faith, however, we can subscribe to an ethic of empowerment that can deeply affect the faith lives and moral decision making of individuals and their families.

#### WHAT IS EMPOWERMENT?

Empowerment is basically like it sounds—“in-power-ing.” When we’re disempowered, we feel as if we have no power—that the power is outside of us and we have no access to the power. You can tell a disempowered person by the blaming and victimization that persists in personal relationships and decision making. This is not to say that life does not sometimes deal us a hard hand, but the empowered person has the ability to respond with resilience and a sense of agency. Empowerment speaks of power sharing and a new awareness of power dynamics that translates into a transformative experience of connection to God, each other, and ourselves. This could be spiritual, emotional, economic, relational, or vocational, but it addresses areas in our lives where we feel acted upon rather than acting, places where God can enter in through the agency of others.

Empowerment, in spiritual and theological terms, is the core of salvation; we are saved from ourselves, our sin, and the social authorities of the world through Christ’s empowerment of us through faith. We could be so bold as to say that much of Jesus’ healing took place as a result of the empowerment of individuals. Take the story of the man who had been lying on his pallet by the Sheep Gate pool for thirty-eight years, waiting for someone to put him in the water. “‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk’” (John 5:1–8). Yes, Jesus healed him of some infirmity but Jesus also shared power with him and gave him a vision beyond his current stalemated life, sitting by the pool.

We have a model of shared power, or an empowered person who empowers, in the form of our heavenly parent. “The Father in the Gospel of John *hands over authority* to the Son, and even to the community (John 3:35, 5:20–22, 26–27), very much ‘unlike the Roman Hellenistic paterfamilias.’ His power is in self-giving, in intimacy, not remoteness. Subsistence is rejected; intimate friendship is offered.”<sup>1</sup> Empowerment, therefore, is not about wielding power, but about the vulnerability of shared power and intimacy. God, therefore, demonstrates how true power is found in transparency, intimacy, and sharing of our own authority and resources.

<sup>1</sup>Stephen Finlan, *Gospel and Ethics: The Family Metaphor in Jesus’ Teaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009) 3. Within the quotation, Finlan cites Dorothy Ann Lee, “The Symbol of Divine Fatherhood,” *Semeia* 85 (1999) 180.

Cheryl Sanders observes that empowerment is “most highly valued as a spiritual transaction that both invokes and responds to the divine presence as mediated through human interaction. To be specific, empowerment ethics means the norms, principles, and ethos ascribed to individuals and groups engaged in the task of liberating others by empowering them to act.”<sup>2</sup> How do we empower others to act? She suggests the Golden Rule could be employed as a “liberative praxis”: as you would that others should do to you—whatever your sex, race, class, sexual preference, or however you measure your status in relation to those others—do so to them.<sup>3</sup> In short, we share power because we would want power shared with us.

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I am a pastor and a social worker, and in social work the word “empowerment” is “inextricably linked to the experiences of oppression, which are most frequently seen in racial and ethnic minority groups and communities.”<sup>4</sup> In my work, I must be aware of the effects of oppression and cultural dominance and, by state law, I must demonstrate that awareness in my practice. It is not a solitary journey but one that needs to be made in community, especially in solidarity with those most affected and in need of good doses of shared power to become empowered. My actions must reflect a deep-seated belief that the family or person I am working with has the capacity to change and grow.

This is closely correlated to the Golden Rule principle above, believing that my status, class, race, or other attributes do not place me in a morally or ethically “right” position in terms of life choices for others. I empower others by using my power as an educated, dominant-culture person in a culturally responsive manner. Being a professional in two helping professions, my tendency is to jump in and “do” for the other. In order to curb my enthusiasm, I have posted the word “Ask” on my mirror to remind me that empowerment is asking the other about what *they* would like to do, not assuming anything. Jesus asked open questions each time he encountered someone who was in need of power. When he encountered blind Bartimaeus, he asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” He invited Bartimaeus to determine what he needed. “The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again’” (Mark 10:51–52). Jesus empowered Bartimaeus by allowing him the dignity to determine his own needs without judgment or assumptions.

Social work practice can be helpful in identifying the various issues inherent

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<sup>2</sup>Cheryl J. Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 4.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>4</sup>Donald Hepworth et al., *Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skills*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole, 2006) 412.

in the empowerment of families. The mission of social work is to “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.”<sup>5</sup> In social work, the key ethical principle is self-determination, or the ability of a person to say what he or she believes to be a good course of action in any given situation. This avoids paternalism or fostering dependency of any sort; it “embodies the belief that clients have the capacity to grow and change and to develop solutions to their difficulties, as well as the right and capacity to exercise free choice responsibly.”<sup>6</sup> This free choice, coupled with responsibility, is the cornerstone of the freedom that Fat Body felt when he realized he was fully formed from the inside out, free as in Luther’s definition: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”<sup>7</sup>

Good pastoral care also embodies this principle of self-determination, heavily tempered by the Christian call to live in community. God calls us to be empowered and to share that empowerment with others, because that is what God has done with us: “The church itself can be understood as the principal arena in which empowered individuals, families, and communities can devote their gifts and resources to serving the needs of others, consistent with the example of Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

#### WHAT IS A FAMILY?

This is a seemingly rhetorical question, but anyone working with families in America today knows that the face and composition of the American family has changed dramatically. Only 20% of US households were identified as nuclear families in the 2010 census, down from 43% in 1950,<sup>9</sup> when the stereotype came to be associated with white, middle-class, suburban, financially secure, happy families.

[The nuclear family] is not the basic unit of society. In first-world countries the individual is the basic unit; in communal societies the extended family or tribe is the basic unit....It is not, as has sometimes been claimed within the church, some sort of “natural,” instinctive, and “sacred” unit...[but] it is the “symbol system” within which we are most often trained to think.<sup>10</sup>

As American society becomes less white and more multiethnic, the size and shape

<sup>5</sup>“Preamble,” *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*, at <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp> (accessed September 30, 2012).

<sup>6</sup>Hepworth, *Direct Social Work Practice*, 63.

<sup>7</sup>Martin Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 386.

<sup>8</sup>Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics*, 6.

<sup>9</sup>Daphne Lofquist, et al., *Households and Families, 2010: 2010 Census Briefs C2010BR-14* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, April 2012) 5. Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-14.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup>Philip Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 14 and 13.

of families follows suit. The nuclear family, therefore, is just one way of organizing the unit known as the family in our society. We are experiencing communal and generative ways of gathering individuals into units called families. The new American family is more amoeba-like than nuclear, growing and shrinking in response to stimuli. The challenge of the church today is to empower the adults in these post-nuclear families to be responsive to the faith formation of the children.

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Marcia Bunge, a longtime researcher of best practices for faith formation, reminds us that Martin Luther and his followers felt that the primary role of parents was to “help children grow in faith, empowering them to use their gifts and talents to love and serve God, the neighbor, and to contribute to the common good.” But Luther did not believe this came naturally from good parenting, so he provided very specific guidelines for the urgent task of nurturing the faith: “When parents are unable to take up this task, or if they have died, then others in the community must take up this task.”<sup>11</sup> But how does that happen and what is the role of the church in “empowering families to help children use their gifts and talents,” as Luther suggests?

Fat Body, who went to Sunday School in a Lutheran Church in Chicago but left church at a young age, gives us practical evidence that others in the community must “take up” the task of faith formation. Do two teenage African American boys, Fat Body and his brother, fit our image of the family that would be welcomed into our congregations? How would they fill out a “family” form on Rally Sunday? How would you empower this “family”?

These questions require us to look at how the nuclear family forms the core of our thinking about families, even though it is neither biblical nor accepting of the current reality in families. “Christians are called to live in communities of love, however they may be configured, and there is little in Christian tradition that would give pride of place to the nuclear family over other configurations.”<sup>12</sup> We need to meet families where they are and accept that the nuclear family was a seven-decade anomaly in our culture that is not shared by more communal cultures. “Family ministry” in our congregations and other settings can reflect this new reality by using new terminology when discussing family structures and by inviting those without children into the inclusiveness of God’s family. Leadership in family ministry could embrace singles, as well as extended families and unrelated

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<sup>11</sup>Marcia Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives: Resources for Raising Children in the Faith,” *Lutheran Partners* 25/4 (July/August 2009), at [http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Lutheran-Partners/Complete-Issue/090708/090708\\_04.aspx](http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Lutheran-Partners/Complete-Issue/090708/090708_04.aspx) (accessed November 15, 2012).

<sup>12</sup>Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*, 14.

groups living in community, such as nursing homes and group homes. We need to expand our idea of “family” in ministry in order to empower all families.

#### WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT FAMILIES?

“If anything, the teachings of Jesus cast a skeptical eye on the family, no matter what its configuration, for it is seen as a potential form of idolatry”<sup>13</sup> (see Matt 3:9; 10:35–36). Idolatry? Could it be that the American “family values” that espouse only four people in a household is a form of idolatry? There are forty diverse forms of family either mentioned or implied in the Bible, ranging from a homeless household (Jesus) to interracial/intercultural marriages (Esau, Moses, Esther, Ruth), commuter marriages (the disciples), blended families (Abraham, Jacob, Herod), unrelated people living together (John and Jesus’ mother Mary), and caring pairs (Ruth and Naomi, Emmaus disciples).<sup>14</sup> Biblical families, therefore, are like modern families in all their diverse forms. We tend to deny the label of “family” to people living without children, yet Jesus spent a good portion of his time with Lazarus, Martha, and Mary—a family consisting of a brother and two unmarried sisters. Jesus acts as an agent of empowerment for this family.

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“Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home” (Luke 10:38). This indicates that Martha was the head of the household and, one assumes, economically empowered as a female homeowner in a patriarchal society. But economic empowerment does not translate into spiritual empowerment, and Jesus tends to her soul when, after she asks him to tell her sister to help her serve the meal, he addresses her distraction. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41–42).

What does Mary have that Martha does not have in this moment? Mary knows who she is. She has accepted who Christ is and is in a relationship with him. She does not have to make Martha happy by doing what her sister thinks is important rather than what Christ is telling her is needed. Jesus tells Martha that she can stop being anxious about what people think of her and attend to the life she has been given through Christ. When we see Martha later, she rushes to meet him while Mary stays in the house, and, after Lazarus’ resurrection “they gave a dinner

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 39.

for him. *Martha served*” (John 12:2, italics added). What has happened to Martha? Based on this narrative, I believe we can build a case for empowerment as knowing and accepting our God-given identity and purpose. I believe the *accepting* is a very large part of the equation. We can “know” our identity the way we know the facts about us on our driver’s license or birth certificate, but God invites us to a different kind of “knowing”: knowing that the God of the Universe created us (Ps 139), that God comes to us now as friend in Christ (John 15:15), and that God will “empower” us to live a life of abundance (John 10:10). Such knowing creates an empowerment that relieves the distraction of living outside of our callings in order to make others happy. We will see our identity and that of God as agency. Security is not outside of us but within. Just as Martha became empowered within the context of her family and her town of Bethany, empowerment moves out from the self as we liberate others in the community.

#### EMPOWERMENT BEGINS AT HOME

Empowerment that centers in the family needs to be relational and contextual. If spiritual empowerment is knowing and accepting our God-given identity and purpose, then social empowerment takes that knowledge into society, into the institutions and social groups that constitute our daily lives. That means that we have to make concrete and practical suggestions that will help parents, ministers, and families gain a critical sense of how to empower others. But truly, we can’t give what we don’t have. The first step to empowering others is to become empowered.

Walter Brueggemann admits, “We are indeed ‘like people, like priest’ (Hos 4:9). That very likely is the situation among many of us in ministry, and there is no unanguished way out of it. It does make clear to us that our ministry will always be practiced through our own conflicted selves.”<sup>15</sup> This brings us to the vulnerability of empowerment and speaks to the deepest levels of our lives—where our addictions, fears about our worth, and hopes for the future cower in the darkness. Brené Brown, a social researcher, says that we are “the most obese, medicated, addicted and in-debt Americans EVER. Why?...Because we don’t talk about the things that get in the way of doing what we know is best for us, our children, our families, our organizations, and our communities.”<sup>16</sup> This speaks to a human family that is looking outside of itself to fill the “God-sized hole” that empowerment addresses. This is an “inside job” and leaders have to go first, which includes seeking to understand why some people in our society will have a harder time becoming empowered, and some will never reach that goal.

“Empowerment ethics posits norms and principles for people in charge, who are serious about their accountability to others in the form of justice.”<sup>17</sup> Just as

<sup>15</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 118.

<sup>16</sup>Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010) 36.

<sup>17</sup>Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics*, 7.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us against “cheap grace,” we need to be spiritually wary of “cheap justice”; “Cheap justice is manifested in the lives of empowered individuals who verbalize prophetic claims on behalf of the oppressed, but who distance themselves physically, emotionally, and politically from the oppressed group, freely imbibing the elite privileges, status and material benefits offered by the very same structures and networks they oppose with words.”<sup>18</sup> We can be empowered ourselves and yet use our privilege to defend ourselves from ever empowering others.

At Redeemer Center for Life, in order to empower each family we seek to understand where they have been, where they are now, and where they dream of going. This includes steeping ourselves in the everydayness of the effects of economic, social, and spiritual oppression in order to bring our compassion and shared power to the table. Why does it matter if we become aware of the “experiences of oppression” and work to break these cycles? Because we are called to this work by our Christian faith, which will draw us toward an ethic of empowerment through Scripture (Luke 4:18; Matt 25:40; Eccl 4:1; Acts 10:38). As we seek to empower every family, the size and shape of families will morph, and young men like Fat Body and his brother will grow the church from the inside out, grateful for a place that dared to call their underage twosome a family. ⊕

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 8.