



Powers and Principalities

Dr. Sharon R. Fennema

Join the Movement toward Racial Justice Curator

As a movement organizer and activist, I appreciate the clarity that emerges when communities who are discerning their calling “to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8, NRSVUE) take the care to distinguish between service and justice. Where service includes acts of compassion or mercy meant to alleviate suffering and intervene in moments of harm in a more immediate way, justice attempts to understand and transform the root causes of suffering and harm. Both of these callings are important and necessary parts of living fully as the Body of Christ in the world.

In my work with churches, I’ve noticed that we are often quite adept at identifying the biblical and theological mandates that undergird our calling to service. From instructions in the Hebrew Scriptures to care for the stranger to the Gospel witness of Jesus’ miracles and parables, it is easy to understand how our acts of compassionate service are part of our vocations as communities of Christ. But folks seem to find it a bit more challenging to engage theologically and scripturally with the justice work of identifying and addressing root causes of injustice. I wonder if a deeper theological understanding of powers and principalities might strengthen not only our thinking but also our practices of justice as part of our Christian vocation.

I was recently introduced to the theological work of gay activist theologian William Stringfellow (thanks to Bill Wylie-Kellerman). Stringfellow was influenced by the student Christian movement following the Second World War, which grappled with the vastness of the evil perpetrated as the Holocaust and the unprecedented death-dealing capacity of nuclear weapons, as well as governmental repression of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and the corruption of the Nixon era. He called for a



“biblical politics” to counter the prevailing political strategy in the United States of using the Bible to justify colonial, military, economic and racial violence ([*An Ethic for Christians and other Aliens in a Strange Land*](#)). In contrast, his biblical politics was rooted in a deep engagement with powers and principalities as institutions, systems, ideologies, and other political and social powers, which serve and incarnate the power of death. Stringfellow notes that our calling as Christians to praise God and live in service to love and life—that is, to “live humanly”—includes unmasking the powers and principalities. Key to resisting and transforming the powers and principalities is understanding and revealing them, in all their specificity, as death-dealers.

I find myself especially drawn to Stringfellow’s assertion that powers and principalities like racism and white supremacy for example, are creatures. For Stringfellow, this means that principalities have “their own existence, personality, and mode of life.” I wonder what we can learn from considering the creatureliness of the principalities of racism and white supremacy.

In her novel, [*The City We Became*](#), African-American science fiction author N.K. Jemisin imagines a many-tentacled white creature sending out fungal-like growths from underneath the city of New York. These white tentacles can attach themselves to people, feeding off of and nourishing their xenophobia and racism, and grow into towers and buildings in the parts of the city where there has been an erasure of culture and displacement of people due to gentrification or experiences of police or state violence. I think Jemisin gives us an idea of what it would look like to imagine the creaturehood of racism and white supremacy in a way that helps unmask it, teaching us more about how that principality pursues its death-dealing vocation.

So in this season of Lent, where we spend time in the wilderness like Jesus did, facing demonic powers and temptations, I invite us to exercise a new kind of theological imagination, one that delves into what we have to learn about justice by critiquing the powers and principalities that foster injustice. I encourage you even now to take a few moments to imagine what racism and white supremacy, as principalities that are creatures, might look like, literally. What do and might we learn from trying to engage with their creaturehood in this way? How might that assist us in pursuing our vocations as members

of the Body of Christ to not only love mercy, but also to do justice?

Finally, be strong in the Sovereign and in the strength of God's power; put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:10-12, NRSVUE)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Sharon R Fennema serves as the Join the Movement toward Racial Justice Curator for the Education for Faithful Action (EFA) Team in the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.

LEARN

ucc.org/justice

DONATE

ucc.org/donate

ARCHIVE

bit.ly/witness4justice



The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.