THE QUESTION OF POWER—commonly defined as the ability to bend others to one's will—is a confused one for the Body of Christ. Clarifying the nature of power—what is permitted, what is rejected?—speaks directly to our vocation to be in, but not of, the world.

On the one hand, those who choose to use power (commonly defined), for the sake of God’s redemptive purposes, frequently become co-opted by the corrosive and corrupt logic inherent to such a choice. On the other hand, those who would refrain from such power usually interpret that choice in ways that remove them from the realities of suffering in the world, claiming neutrality and exhibiting passivity.

What, then, can we affirm? Surely that believers are saved for the world, not from it.

Nevertheless, it is not granted to us to bend any other’s will to our own, even for the sake of our Lord. We refuse to wield such power on grounds of obedience to the Gospel. We are, in fact, willing to “lose.” We base this refusal in our confidence in the Resurrection, namely: The ultimate power of God to redeem life, even from the very jaws of death.

To be sure, we hope to be influential, to participate as agents of redemption, to actively confront the domination of the weak by the strong. We do so because we are marked by the insignia of our baptism, a mark which indicates the willingness to lose all, even mortal life itself, for the sake of the Reign of God.

WE BELIEVE that the power of God, the Abba of Jesus—whom we acknowledge as Christ—is the power to claim by relinquishing, voluntarily submitting to body broken, blood spilt, rather than by grasping, by shedding the blood of others.

WE AFFIRM that this power, and this power alone, is sufficient to subvert the ruling powers of this age. It is messianic power in the manner of Jesus, whose career was the incarnation of such uncommon power. We testify that just such a career, embedded in just such a
such a name—one inviting our participation—is given for the world’s salvation. Such is the nature of our partisanship.

Let no one confuse our Suffering Servanthood with servility or subservience. Ironically, our peaceful vocation may lead us on occasion into the whirlwind of trouble. Civil disobedience may in fact be holy obedience. The announcement of the peace of Christ may at times provoke a disturbance of the “peace,” where such peace is nothing more than the oppressive calm of silenced dissent and suppressed justice. As the prophet has noted, our sins cannot be healed lightly. Demands for “peace, peace” must face the questions of justice—which in turn must submit to the imperative of mercy.

If the wall of righteousness is to stand, repair must be made. The dream of a beloved community must incite new energy: to rebuild ruined neighborhoods, to restore marginalized peoples, to reconstitute a politics of forgiveness and an economy of manna—to remember its forsaken Sovereign.

Nevertheless, we are not the guarantors of redemption. The Spirit may or may not bring our redemptive purposes to fruition in ways we can calculate or control. We often experience the forestalling and frustration of redemption. We live by faith, not by sight; by promise, not by warranty; by covenant, not by contract. The salvation promised is not for our narrow careers but for all of creation. The vision still awaits its time. And we wait with vigilance; it will surely come.

For we are witnesses, not engineers, to the in-breaking of God’s Reign. We are buoyed by hope which we neither manage nor sustain. The joy of our lives is not tethered to the relative success of our efforts. The security of our conviction is sustained by a Realm transcending the political prospects of this present age. Because of our confidence in Christ’s faithfulness we are content to submit ourselves to this prophetic announcement of divine assurance: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord” (Zechariah 4:6).

—Ken Sehested