Empowerment

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, November 1, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.
Scriptures: Mark 6:30-44 and Mark 10:46-52
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Two celebrities – at least they were celebrities in my book – died this week: Dolores Huerta died on Wednesday, and Patrick Stewart died on Friday.

Dolores Huerta's celebrity for me comes from her being arguably the nation's most well-known Latina civil-rights activist. She was the co-founder, with Cesar Chavez, of the United Farm Workers (UFW), the first nationally recognized union for farm workers. She spent decades fighting against labor injustices and for political, racial, and gender equality.

She also carried a secret for many decades. Earlier this year, Huerta revealed that Chavez had sexually abused her during their time as union leaders. Not knowing that Chavez had manipulated and assaulted others, Huerta said, "I carried this secret for as long as I did because building the movement and securing farmworker rights was my life's work."[1] I refuse to second guess her decision. It was hers to make. Instead, I celebrate the good she did.

For me, Patrick Stewart's celebrity is wrapped up in the role he played for seven seasons in Star Trek: The Next Generation, the role of Captain Jean-Luc Picard. He was an amazing actor who I got to see on Broadway playing the lead in one of Shakespeare's classics. It was either *Twelfth Night* or *The Tempest* – they both start with shipwrecks, so I confuse them.

Beyond his acting, I admire Stewart's deep allyship in the resistance to intimate partner violence (that overwhelmingly is violence by men against women). In his autobiography, *Making It So* (2023), he wrote about growing up in a violent household. By then, he'd been talking about it for almost two decades. As part of Amnesty International's 2004 global campaign to reduce violence against women, he recalled: "I saw the self-loathing of my father, due to his inability to control his violent outbursts. I saw society, police, doctors and neighbours conspire to hide the abuse with comments like: 'She must have provoked him', and: 'It takes two to make an argument'."[2] Stewart worked hard to get people, and especially men, to recognize that they are responsible for controlling their violent impulses.

While I certainly have some "community organizer" energy in my personality, and while I am comfortable speaking in front of people, I reflect on the lives of these two and

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[1] Dolores Huerta, "Read the Statement From Dolores Huerta on Cesar Chavez's Abuse," *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/18/us/dolores-huerta-statement-cesar-chavez.html (posted 18 March 2026; accessed 29 October 2026).
[2] Debbie Andalo, "Star Trek star backs domestic violence campaign," *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2004/mar/05/crime.penal (posted 5 March 2004; accessed 29 October 2026).

think, "They had unique sets of gifts, talents that were extraordinary. Now that they're gone, they're irreplaceable."

"Thinking that way is actually a thing; it's documented. The 'Great Man' view of history, it's called. It was suggested first by Thomas Carlyle, a philosopher who lived in the nineteenth century. Carlyle believed that the story of civilization is really a biography of great men (yes – all men) who have shaped history through the force of their leadership, their intellect, the beauty and charisma of their presence. Think Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Napoleon, Washington, Aristotle, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Our culture has mostly adopted this theory."[3] I know I've sometimes thought that what the climate movement needs is a charismatic leader, someone who will be our spokesperson, someone who will singly, individually, accomplish great things. In other words, a hero. We wait around "for some bigger-than-life figure to come and lead us, to fix what is wrong, to overpower all the obstacles with their goodness or their answers to the hardest questions. When we discover that they're real people with flaws, they disappoint us. And then we just keep looking, thinking that maybe the problem is simply that we made the wrong choice, invested our hope in someone who was not the 'great man'."[4]

While I listed Jesus as one of the 'great men' Carlyle's theory, I think that's a misidentification. I think Jesus actually wanted to turn those expectations on their head. "Jesus didn't have much use for hero worship. He was never captured by other people's expectations about what a Messiah was supposed to be able to do. He was always turning people's focus away from himself. All through the Gospels, you can see that people kept wanting Jesus to capitalize on his power, to be the hero they [thought they] needed someone to be."[5] He kept refusing.

We see this in John's telling of the story of the feeding of the multitude. "When the multitudes eat plentifully of the loaves and fishes he serves up, a number of them jump in boats the next day and head to Capernaum to see if he'll fill their stomachs a second time. Jesus is ready for them: 'You are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted' (John 6:26)."[6] In other words, the "people pursue him for what they believe they might get from him, rather than who they might become through him."[7]

The people tell him to turn stones into bread, to declare himself king, to call down an army of angels to save him from crucifixion. And Jesus refuses. He doesn't raise up an army to overthrow the Roman Empire. He says, "Love your enemies."

To be clear, "Jesus didn't shy away from being a leader, but he led in a different way. He used power in a way no one had seen before.… When Jesus led, … he did it with an odd sort of submission, an obedience to a larger story, a vision bigger than his own – this thing he called the Kingdom of God. Status and privilege seemed to mean nothing to him. He

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[3] Rev. Kathi McShane, "Changemaking Made Simple: Pass the Power," a sermon that manuscript made available through *The Worship Design Studio*, https://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/.
[4] *Ibid*.
[5] *Ibid*.
[6] Peter W. Marty, "All we may become," *The Christian Century*, September 2026, page 1.
[7] *Ibid*.

didn't seek those things for himself, and he didn't back down when other people used their status and privilege to try to make him smaller. It was like instead of being intimidated by the power structures around him, he was disarming them.

"You can see why Jesus couldn't be a political leader. Political leadership is always about accumulating and exercising power over things. Politics is about giving someone the power to control: people, laws, institutions. Jesus used power for something different. It was a container he poured from. A magnum of compassion, emptying itself again and again for the sake of others, for their healing, their flourishing. And he offered power – his power – to everyone. He literally gave power away, as if there was no reason to hold onto it. As if it was a continually renewable resource."[8]

We see this in the story of the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness. When it was time for dinner and the disciples wanted Jesus to send the crowd away, Jesus said, "Use what you've got. You feed them." That's one of the reasons I think the miracle of the story is not that Jesus magically multiplied five loaves of bread into enough bread to feed five thousand. I think the miracle of the story is that people realized that they had to power to feed each other, that, in fact, there was more than enough to feed everyone, and then some. Jesus empowered his disciples and the crowd to use their resources to meet the needs of the community.

Something similar happens in the story of the healing of Bartimaeus. We could focus on Jesus' power. Or we can notice that, first of all, Bartimaeus claimed his own power by advocating for himself when he insisted on calling out to Jesus. And second, we can notice what Jesus said about Bartimaeus' power: "Go; your faith has made you well." Jesus tells Bartimaeus that he did this. And third, we can notice that Bartimaeus didn't follow Jesus' directions. Jesus told him to "Go." And Bartimaeus didn't. He followed Jesus "on the way." Bartimaeus followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and was present in the last days of Jesus' life. His experience with Jesus led him to action, to purpose, and to steadfast love and loyalty.

Over the past three weeks, we've reflected on three qualities of changemakers. First, we reflected on how changemakers are rooted in compassion, how changemaking comes out of caring about someone's suffering. Then we reflected on how changemaking isn't solo work, that we do our best changemaking work in collaboration with others. Last week we reflected on how changemakers are people who think creatively about how to use the things they are holding right now to make small, significant differences that move us toward solving big problems. Today, the message is this: changemakers use their own influence to empower other people.

The story of Bartimaeus reminds us that healing is not an end-goal. Helping is not an end-goal. Transformation is the end-goal. And transformation is much more than the reversal of a bad situation. To be a changemaker is to help create the conditions for more and more people to be "on the way," more and more people who are being part of the solutions our world so desperately needs. So, as we consider how we are to be

[8] McShane, *op. cit*.

changemakers in the world and what kind of actions and causes deserve our attention and our resources, we must keep empowerment at the core of what we do.

A little later in the service, we're going to present our pledges of financial support of the church's work in the coming year. I hope you will see your pledge as an act of empowering compassionate, collaborative, creative changemaking.

Amen.