



## Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene      The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

### **2 Samuel 5:1-5,9-10    2 Corinthians 12:2-10    Mark 6:1-13**

Today, on this July 4<sup>th</sup>, we hear of kingmakers and God-deniers. We hear of power given and power not given. We hear of roadblocks and new pathways.

It is fitting that today's scriptures carry us onward in our reflections on power, today especially as this nation celebrates its declaration of independence.

In today's scripture readings, we hear of David being made king at the consent and request of the elders of Israel. We hear of Jesus being unable to do any acts of power back in his own hometown and home country, because they chose to take offense at him. We hear of Jesus sending his disciples out to bring God's good news in word and healing power, with nothing but each other and the hospitality of strangers to rely on, and the impact they had across the country. We hear in the epistle of Paul wrestling with his own spiritual power, and finding a message from God coming to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

What is power? And what is the power of God, in a world where it so often seems that power is used in corrupt and abusive ways? What is the power of the kingdom of God, the Way of Jesus?

We can recall that power itself, like desire and like ownership and possession, is not in and of itself evil or good. It is a truth of life in this world that God has created. Power is the ability to act, to make something happen, to bring change or keep steady. Power involves our movement and effort in the world, putting ourselves "out there" in some way in interaction with the world all around us.

It is how we use power, for what intent we use power, and with what impact on others we use power – and how we recognize and work with other peoples' and creatures' powers -- that we move into the territory of power for good and power for evil and sin.

Today, we hear how in a world of non-acceptance, God's power is made perfect in weakness.

There is power given or not given. The choice to give power to someone and to share power is just that – a choice. The elders of Israel could have chosen not to accept David as their king. But they still wanted a king, and David was highly regarded for all he had done for Israel even while being pursued as an enemy and fugitive by the previous king, Saul. It was natural for the elders to make the choice. And this makes the story very different than if David had attempted to seize power by force.

There is power of receiving, not receiving someone else's power and authority. The choice to receive what someone offers and extends. And, in many ways, the power of the receiver is what actually completes the circuit and opens up the flow of power to have its full impact. Jesus found the flow of God's power blocked by the attitudes of people in his own hometown region. Everywhere else so far in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has been taking on the binding powers of darkness directly, healing people considered incurable of all kinds of mental, physical, and spiritual ailments – and he has been encountering opposition by religious leaders and suspicion of insanity by his own family who attempted to come and take him home. But here, when he came back with his disciples to his own hometown,

nothing seemed to have any impact. People were so wrapped up in their own memories of Jesus growing up, and the images they had in their minds of him and his family, that they could not hear him for what he was really saying and offering them. They were astounded – shocked – at his teaching, and they took offense at him.

And so, as the Gospel of Mark says, Jesus could do no acts of power there. Literally, in the Greek, he did not have the power – was not able – to act, to make something happen, to bring about any change or lift up any strong steady paths forward for people. He was only able to do a few healings. Nothing else. This is the Son of God we are talking about here! This is God incarnate, God-with-us, who finds himself unable to do something – because we will not receive. What are we to make of that?

Everywhere else, Jesus found the power flowing through him to others who were eager to receive – remember from last week, the woman who reached out to touch his clothing, and power flowing out of Jesus because Jesus was exercising the power of complete openness and availability? The woman was ready – eager! – to receive. Now, there is a power that comes with fresh contact, with being the new person and stranger who brings fresh hope and possibility to all those who are eager to receive. But at home, Jesus finds the confining power of expectations and habits of mind that end up blocking people's openness to something new.

Raw power by force or even by nagging or cajoling or pleading or charm can't break through the confining expectations and biases that people hold. Think about times in our own lives when we have encountered that kind of resistance to who we are and what we bring as children of God – what we know in our hearts is good and from God and from our hearts as beloved made in God's image. Think about the discomfort of Thanksgiving reunions or returning home to a place where the same conversations and patterns and ideas have frozen people's minds and hearts. Here is where Jesus found himself – at the family and neighborhood gathering, like our Thanksgiving or Christmas or July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend – and “he could do no deed of power.”

And Jesus knew that more force wouldn't work. You all know the old Aesop's fable of the wind, the sun, and the man with a coat? It goes like this. The wind and sun were having an argument about who was the strongest, the most powerful. They couldn't settle the argument, so they looked to have a contest. There was a man walking along with a coat on. The sun said, “Let's see who can get the man to take off his coat.” The wind went first, and started blowing to get the coat off of the man. The man felt the wind and began to pull his coat closer around him. So, the wind blew harder, and the man tugged his coat around him tighter. This went on for a while until the wind was almost blowing the man over. Then the wind was exhausted and stopped. The sun stepped forward and said, “Let's see how this works.” And the sun shone gently and steadily down. The air grew warmer, and the man looked up, saw it was a nice and warm day, began to perspire just a bit, and took off his coat.

This is power shifted, pivoted, taken in a new direction.

So, Jesus turns in a new direction. He recedes a bit into the background, withdrawing from his hometown and visiting other neighboring villages. More than that, he hands over power to his disciples. He sends them out in pairs, in the company of each other (not alone), to bring the powerful and life-changing good news of God to the communities around the countryside.

Think about it. What we see today in the Gospel of Mark is the power of giving away power to others. There is a risk, of course. “What if I hand this over to others? What will they do with it?” But Jesus embraces this, and acts with a gracious power of accepting a “failure” (certainly in the eyes of some others around him, and maybe even in his own eyes), allowing the situation to be what it is, and then pivoting and giving away power to others.

This is part of what Paul points to in the power that comes with what the world may perceive as weakness. God’s life-changing power comes through weakness that we are willing to recognize in ourselves. As the good people of Alcoholics Anonymous say, a first important step on the path to recovery and healing is to admit that I have no power in myself alone, that I need the Sovereign and Almighty Lord and Lover of all creation to help make a path where I am unable on my own, that I need others to support and strengthen and prod and confront me – and that the best I can do is open myself to receive the higher power that God is always offering and the friendly powers that others around me are sharing and giving.

How will we receive one another? Yes, as we discussed last week, how will we be open to others and the world around us, letting ourselves be fully available to others? But then, beyond that, how will we receive others and what they offer?

This is a question I have for us as a nation, these days. How will we receive one another? Will we cut ourselves off from each other? Will we open ourselves to the possibility of receiving from each other? How will we decide to exercise the power of receiving in this nation? How will we be together?

This was a question on the hearts of leaders of the Puritan community that dared to cross the Atlantic to start a new settlement in this land. Let’s go back before the Declaration of Independence to this earlier time, when some of the deepest roots of who we are began to form. John Winthrop, a passenger and lawyer among the group of passengers, stood on one of the boats as they were about set sail from England and gave a speech that is very much like a sermon, noting how they had put themselves at the mercy of God Almighty – and he spoke to everyone’s deep uncertainty of what lay ahead. He did not speak much on freedom or liberty, but on the deep and enduring need for the bonds of community and mutual care. Here is some of what he said:

*“Now, the only way to avoid this shipwreck” [not just at sea but after landing and possibly making a mess of things], “and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people.”<sup>1</sup>*

I worry, and I pray, for our nation. I pray that this nation can return to a spirit of mutual care, where “my rights” and “my freedom” take their proper back seat to care for each other and for the shared common

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<sup>1</sup> From John Winthrop’s sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity.” Quoted from Stephen Prothero (2012), *The American Bible: Whose America Is This? How Our Words United, Divide, and Define a Nation*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, p. 43.

good. I pray that we move away from a spirit of turf wars to a spirit of willingness to give to and receive from one another, and thus to a spirit of being knit together. I pray that this church can be ambassadors and examples in all our lives of this kind of life-changing power that can flow from us and that we can open ourselves to receive from others – always inviting others to open themselves along with us to receive from the God who continues to give and give and give because that is the very nature of who God is. Let this be our vision! Throw on the light switch! Let us receive the power of Christ that continues to flow always! Let this be our vision, our quest, our journey, and our pledge in following Jesus. Amen.