

2 Samuel 11: 1 – 15  
Ephesians 3: 14 – 21  
John 6: 1 – 21  
9 Pentecost, Proper 12

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### **“To Make a King”**

I have lost count of the number of candidates now vying to be President of the United States. It seems like half of the Senate, half of all governors, and slew of former senators and governors have all announced their candidacies, and there may be more waiting in the wings. And there are those “other guys.” Given what being President does to most people, one wonders why so many people want the job at all. It is true that one gets to ride in Air Force One and some band plays that funny tune, “Hail to the Chief” whenever one shows up, and, I gather, you get to ignore all traffic laws – no waiting in ferry lines for you and no taking off your shoes or other articles of clothing in airports. Now that I mention it, perhaps there’s still time for me to announce.

It is clear, though, that the call of the Presidency is not the salutes or the airplane or the government housing, or the “ruffles and flourishes and anthem;” the true lure is power. The attraction of most leadership jobs is really the power to do things, change things, to make history by altering the arc of the world. That is what turns otherwise proud people into baby-kissers, wearers of silly hats, consumers of bad food, and makers of impossible promises. Choosing a President the way we do it is among the silliest of processes save for all the other ways humans have tried to choose leaders. And admitting it’s about power makes some of us nervous. We worry that power will corrupt people and cause pain for others. Power differences war with our notion that we are a nation of equals; that no one can tell me what to do.

And we really dislike talking about power when it comes to religion. Yet, much of Holy Scripture is about power, about politics, about the ordering of human kind either in congruence with or more often not congruent with God’s desires for all of creation. While it is understandable that many congregations are made uncomfortable by preachers using the pulpit for promoting partisan political views, it is also the case that the Gospel is political in the sense of describing how the human world might be organized in a manner in keeping with God’s desires rather than only human desires. “Polis” the root word of politics means a city state in ancient Greece – how they organized themselves, how they related one to another, and how they solved disagreements. All human communities have politics – it starts with that policy debate about the dangers and benefits of eating that one forbidden fruit.

Our Scripture this morning contains a variety of views about the uses of power and what those uses can lead to. David, the great David, the handsome, ruddy, wonder boy who defeated Goliath and rose to amazing heights of power manages, in this part of his life history, to ruin several lives and endangers his own soul all for a brief exercise of personal power. David shirks his kingly duty and does not go to war with his troops. He commits adultery and brings about a scandal. To solve his problem, he commits more sins and seeks to hide his crime. Ultimately, he resorts to a form of murder to get rid of the annoying spouse of the woman he violated. Sounds like “Game of Thrones” or some other HBO special, doesn’t it? At every turn of the story, this chosen one of God, picked from obscurity, raised to greatness, given every blessing, adored by

so many, gifted with so many amazing abilities, this David succumbs to the corroding influence of un-checked power and believes that he, somehow, alone is above God's law. Have we ever seen anything like this in our day? Would that this sad tale was limited to Holy Scripture but I am afraid all of us could name many other stories that sound remarkably like David, Bathsheba and Uriah. The characters are all too familiar; only the names, dates, and places have changed.

Power is not ours to own. Power is lent to us for a time and only for particular purposes. And great power must be used with extraordinary care because great power has great consequences for many. In so many organizations, someone comes along with great charisma, amazing abilities, and inspires others with great hope. They are adulated, cosseted, adored. They are forgiven small errors and sins for their strengths are so needed and so great. We, the followers, begin to co-enable the leader by our overlooking their flaws and ceding to their wishes. At some point, the adored ones begin to believe they are special, they are above the fray, they are chosen. It is at that point that they are in grave danger along with those they claim to lead.

Paul understands this conundrum of leadership very well. It why he asserts to the Ephesians that he, Paul, bows before God for God is the source of all power. For Paul, it is only through the power of Christ crucified that we can make a difference in the world. It is never for our own glory that we strive to serve and to improve but rather our fullness will come through service to God through Christ Jesus.

Jesus senses the power trap around him and, when the crowd, in adulation for his amazing powers, for he has fed so many with food in abundance, seeks to "take him by force" to make Jesus a King, he flees to the mountain top by himself. Why does he do that?

Jesus knows the dark side of that call to earthly kingship. Not because Jesus fears how such power might corrupt him, but because Jesus knows his work is not about forcing the kingdom of heaven upon people. Jesus is about something else entirely. Jesus is about a new kind of power in the world. Jesus is about love as power, not force as power. The story of the feeding of the five thousand, told in every Gospel, is a classic tale of what sort of power Jesus is about. Yes, Jesus is capable of doing greater things than any other king could imagine. But that would be power as force. Jesus first feeds others rather than feed himself. Jesus shares out what is available without overly worrying about how far the food will go. Jesus displays power to care for others, feed others, and comfort others. And we should note that Jesus is doing this work on the other side – the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee. All this power is offered freely to outsiders. Jesus gives his power away to others so that they might live. Jesus, who had greater powers than the world could ever know, goes to the cross, punished by the greatest political and military power on earth in that day, and rose again to even greater glory.

This is a power matrix turned upside down. Power is given away yet the giver is still greater for having given all. Jesus reveals himself as a mirror opposite of David. And in so doing, Jesus shows us that he was never to be king or leader as we understand those words. Jesus is not David without flaws. Jesus is God. And God is love. And Ephesians tells us that the power is at work within us and that power, at work in us, will be able to accomplish more than all we can ask or imagine. The power of God is at work within us. The power of God calls us to a new life in Christ; the power of God propels us into new ministries; the power of God gives us strength

and courage to be witnesses in the world; the power of God takes away our fears, our worries, and our anxieties.

Most of us will never have the power of David or the President of the United States. But many of us have wielded significant power in our lives. Our decisions may have affected hundreds or thousands of people. Clergy may not seem to have much power these days but because society still concedes some authority and stature to clergy, they, too, can influence lives in profound ways. Lamentably, some clergy have been quite like David and damaged themselves and others by their actions. Leaders of all sorts have failed their followers and themselves over and over again.

We can be grateful that we are not David or the President. And if we have political, economic, or social power, we are admonished by these readings to use it with exquisite care and sensitivity. For the rest of us, we can glory in the power of God that we call love; that power that affirms, that power that supports, that power that nurtures, that power that creates. For that power we call love really will do more than we ask or imagine. God's power never corrupts; God's power grows new life for the world. And that dear friends, is far better than salutes, fancy airplanes or all ruffles and flourishes of this world. Amen.