

Everywhere we look these days we are confronted with issues of power – Afghanistan, Iran, Honduras, Zimbabwe to name but a few of the places where political struggles for power have recently reached violent proportions. And of course we are in the midst of our own power struggle that will surely be exacerbated in the run up to the next election. Power – who has it, who’s lost it, who wants it, and how will those who possess it, use it – these are questions that fuel the public appetite for celebrity and keep political pundits employed.

Twenty-first century culture is certainly not unique in its fascination with power and the powerful, but I have to say we may have reached new heights with the use of terms like “Superpower.” Nor is this fascination limited to the political arena or the world of entertainment. In fact, the fascination with power might be even more intense in the religious arena. Then again, it isn’t always easy to tell where the political arena ends and the religious arena begins, or vice versa.

What is this thing we call power? The dictionary defines power simply as the ability to do something, in other words, the ability to act. However, it isn’t that aspect of power that seems to hold us in its thrall, for that kind of power belongs to just about everybody. What is infinitely more interesting is the power that, as Christian writer Barbara Brown Taylor says, “thrives in the rare air at the top of any given hierarchy, where those who have it generally require tinted windows and bodyguards.” It is the power that, amongst other things, includes in its definition, strength and influence, control and authority; it is the kind of power that when possessed seems to give off something akin to a magnetic pull, attracting all objects within its field that captivates us. Though we may not always know how to define it, we almost always know when we have come in contact with someone who has it. And a sure sign is that others know it too and want to be part of it, hoping that a little will rub off on them, especially those who feel they will never be accorded power on their own in this world.

According to the Gospel tradition Jesus had “it” in spades. Only a brief encounter with him caused people to abandon the security of their homes and livelihoods. Wherever he went he attracted crowds. Some were satisfied with a word or a touch, others demanded whatever it was they believed they needed to save them from their powerlessness.

Jesus seems to have understood the dangerous and slippery nature of power, especially as defined by the conventional wisdom. He had attempted on numerous occasions to explain to his disciples what would be waiting for him in Jerusalem trying to disabuse them of any illusions of grandeur, but

they just wouldn't hear it. They were sure he was going right to the top and they intended to go right there with him.

You've got to hand it to James and John. They certainly had nerve. There is a reason they were called Sons of Thunder. "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you." They didn't even have the humility to put it in the form of a question.

We can hardly blame them, however. Who wants to hear that the star to which they've hitched their wagon is about to crash and burn? Who wants to follow someone whose footsteps lead to the bottom of the heap instead of the top? The first shall be last? The great are the ones who serve?

Jesus knew that James and John didn't have a clue what they were doing when they asked to sit at his right hand and his left. But he treated their question seriously. Are you sure? Can you drink from the same cup? Can you be baptized with the same baptism? In their ignorance they answered, "of course!" And Jesus, again taking them seriously, responded, "Okay, then, it shall be yours. You shall drink from the same cup, you shall be baptized with the same baptism."

They didn't know it then, but they would soon thank God that Jesus was not able to fulfill their request about sitting at the right and left hand – a place, as it turned out, reserved for two thieves.

James and John may have had the most cheek of the disciples, but they all had their eyes on Election Day when Jesus would come into his own and the top cabinet posts would be appointed. Furious that Zebedee's boys had outflanked the, the other disciples began to fume and argue.

It is at this point Jesus offers an explanation of the difference between power as the world knows and exercises it and power in the realm of God, and in doing so he opens a window to understanding the meaning of his death.

Jesus corrects their vision by holding up the conventions of gentile (Roman) sociopolitical authorities as negative examples. Relying on coercion and control to maintain their dominance and prerogatives, they regularly "overpower" and "tyrannize" others. The story of John the Baptizer's death earlier in Mark's gospel, in which self-interest and self-protection trump justice to ensure John's demise, provides a stark example of this understanding and exercise of power. The collaboration of the political and religious elite at Jesus' trial in Jerusalem will soon manifest a similar kind of strong-armed political theater.

In absolute contrast, greatness in God's realm is measured by one's ability to live as servant and slave to all, even if that life means suffering oppression at the hands of those who wield power in this realm. Jesus will

embody such subjection in his passion, when he affirms the promise of his glorification, but forgoes the power to control his fate or to prevail over others.

Jesus' final word to the disciples - "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many: - reveals that his death will be exemplary for such a way of living. His death will exemplify the violence and resistance his teaching and ministry elicit from those who hold power over society, and it will exemplify a radical renunciation of authority and privilege, as these things are normally constructed in this world. What makes the renunciation so radical is that it is God's uniquely authorized agent, God's only begotten, the Word in whom and through whom all that exists was brought into being, who does it.

At the same time, Jesus' mention of a "ransom" indicates that his death will be more than just an inspiring example or a martyr's tragic protest against an unjust system. The word used – *lytron* in Greek – means to secure a release or liberation wrought by divine strength. It is the same word used to describe God's liberation of the Israelites from bondage in the book of Exodus. In his explanation to the disciples, Jesus proclaims that God, through Jesus' death and resurrection, will free people from oppression and captivity to other powers, restoring them to membership in the community of God's realm.

Like James and John and the others, we keep expecting the new realm to look like the old realm, only better with the good guys in charge. But Jesus keeps telling us that the new realm isn't anything like the old realm, in fact it is the exact opposite of the old realm. The new world is the old world turned upside down – where leaders are servants, adults become as children, the workers who show up after lunch get paid the same as those who arrived at sun-up, and where power has a very different look and feel because it comes from a very different source and is exercised in a very different way.

In God's realm power is the power of love and compassion, the power to create and raise up, the power to do justice, to live humbly and to walk with our God. It is the power motivated not by reward, but by the desire to make a difference, to change the world. What is it we need to do in our lives and in our life together, in our community in order to fully exercise our God redeemed power?

New Testament Scholar and Preaching Professor Fred Craddock tells a story about God's call when he was a young man. Like many young and idealistic people of his generation, who had offered their lives into Church service he was prepared to give it all, to make the grand gesture. In his imagination he envisioned how it would all play out. He saw his tearful

parents bidding him good-bye as he left for the mission field – someplace remote and dangerous – where he would faithfully serve and finally pay the ultimate price to the Glory of God. A simple stone would mark the spot where years later members of The Ladies Missionary Society from First Christian Church would travel and reverently whisper to one another ”here’s where little Freddie gave up his life for Christ.” Yes, he was ready to cash it all in, like a hundred dollar bill lay it all on the table. “It took me a few years,” Fred recounts, “but what I discovered is that what God wanted from me wasn’t the grand gesture. God didn’t want the \$100 bill on the table. What God wanted was for me to take that \$100 bill to the bank and get it changed into quarters and spend it 25 cents and 50 cents at a time. –

Jesus was willing to pay with his life that we might be freed from bondage to the death wielding powers that set human beings against one another and our Creator, all he asks of us is 20 pence at a time.

