

“A Measure of Power”

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2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Mark 6:14-29

What does it take to be powerful? As a woman who was raised in the South, “power” was not an attribute I was particularly encouraged to embody. Creative, kind, thoughtful... these attributes people encouraged me to attain. I still think these are great attributes, and hopefully I possess some of them.

But I am interested in power, and who gets it, and how they use it. Among progressive people, we sometimes shy away from power. We know histories when power has been corrupt or abusive. And so we often take a light approach, careful to not be domineering, step on another’s toes, or offend.

But power is not inherently bad. *How* we get power, and how we use power, determines the ethics of our power. Someone in our church just got solar panels on the rooftop of her home, I noticed recently while walking my dog on her block. We all use power, but if we want sustainable ways to light, heat, and cool our homes or operate our vehicles, we need to consider greener sources of power over ones that destroy our earth.

Our scriptures tell of two celebrations of power: one centered around the festive arrival of the Ark of the Covenant into the City of David, and another a banquet, centered around Herod’s birthday. In the first celebration, it is about the power of God providing a unifying center for a kingdom that had been very much divided. The Ark of the Covenant was a box, which traveled on a cart. The box, or Ark, contained tablets of the Torah, including the Ten Commandments. The Hebrews believed the glory of God rested upon the Ark-- so bringing it into Jerusalem meant to them that God would be at the center of their newly forming city-- and that they then could be as powerful and mighty as God. Or at least, they hoped for such power.

The other celebration was also about power. Herod's birthday celebration was fit for a king-- even if Herod himself was no king. He wanted to be one, though, and he had petitioned Caesar multiple times to become king. Still, Herod only attained the title of Tetrarch-- that is, governor. But I can imagine the kind of party he threw, and how it would have impressed his guests, his courtiers and officers. A party fit for a king. The smoke from torch light and incense, mixed with the aroma of food. Can you smell the lamb roasting on the spit? The rich wine, generously poured? Hot bread, just pulled off the walls of the stone oven? Imagine the sounds of the harp and bells starting to play, the beat of a hand on a drum.

A surprise: Herod's stepdaughter offers a dance for him. Pop of the hip, roll of the belly, tilt of the head, gaze of the eye: in a culture that rarely gave women power, here is a place where her power can shine. Herod is so pleased by her dance that he publicly offers to her *anything* she asks of him. The girl's mother coached her on what to say: "The head of John the Baptist on a platter," the girl replied to Herod.

What could Herod do? Well... *he could have said no!* After all, the gospel reports that John the Baptist was Herod's prisoner; but even so, Herod had protected him up to this point from his wife of an incestuous relationship. Although John-- the truth teller--had judged Herod for taking his brother's wife as his own wife, Herod *kept going* to John's cell to listen to him. You should understand that this Herod was a distant relative from the Herod of Jesus' birth, the one who committed genocide in order to prevent the Messiah from being born and rising to challenge *his* power. This Herod was a different ruler, from another generation. Scripture says Herod was greatly perplexed by John; but it also said Herod liked to listen to John. On some level, it seems, John held a spiritual power that beckoned to Herod. So, Herod could have said "no." In his house, at his party, he-- the governor-- had the power to say no.

But that's not what Herod did. He had made an oath in front of his whole party. To back down would make him look like a fool. And so, what began as a joyful and festive occasion ended up as a bloody political assassination.

This act sounds primitive and gruesome and removed from how things happen in contemporary American politics— but then again, yesterday evening, a presidential candidate was grazed by a bullet in what is said to be an assassination attempt. The parallels stop there: John was executed for being a truth teller, and for calling out a politician’s illicit affair. I won’t say more about the person who was shot last night, except this: many factors are influencing this election: the power of aging, the power of lies, the power of truth, the power of past mistakes, the power of reproductive choice, the power of criminality and the justice system, the power of undecided voters, the power of a possible summer surprise change of ballot names... but *violence*? Is that really the power through which democracy should speak?

Not that our country does not readily supply deadly weapons to other countries and other actors, or to poor neighborhoods on our own shores, or even to people who may bring them to use at a school, a concert, a nightclub, or a grocery store. In this country, we glorify violence as much as we hate it. We know that the intent of political violence – in addition to causing harm – is to **inflame tensions, sow chaos, and drive escalation of further violence**¹. And so however we may feel about the person who was shot— and I recognize the likelihood of complex feelings in the room— I will draw us back to how Jesus found power. It was not through violence, but through the subverting of violence, that Jesus overcame oppressive power and the worst of human violent tendencies. Jesus’ death on the cross was violent, the kind of violence empire endorses. But his teachings taught us another way to find power, a way of peace. And his resurrection showed us that violence does not get the last word.

David accompanied a powerful celebration of a wholly different occasion. He provided the dancing— what seemed like a joyful ecstasy, along with the trumpet, and David wore nothing but a loincloth. Did David dance as a response of faithfulness and joy, an expression of delight and devotion in the presence of God? Or did David’s dance demonstrate something else, entirely? Such a parading spectacle might have been an act of propaganda and power, to inspire the Israelites with an emblem of unity and a sign of God’s endorsement of them. In David’s case, it had been a messy pathway to kingship. The prophets had warned against kingship, because they knew that a king would distract the people from their reliance on God alone. They warned that a king would misuse

¹ Words from nonprofit Common Ground USA <https://www.sfcg.org/>

power, oppress the people and become consumed with greed. And in order for David to become king, he had to overcome Israel's first ruler, King Saul. At this point in the story, Saul had died after losing in battle, and throwing himself over his own sword.

Saul's daughter Michal had been married to David. And she watched from a window as David danced alongside the Ark, and "she despised him in her heart." At first glance, one might see Michal as lacking in joy in the presence of God. Who was she to scorn an act of rapturous devotion by David? But Michal has been around long enough to know things are not as they appear. She once loved David, and even risked her life trying to protect him from her father Saul. But David repeatedly chose other women over her-- and married them. And then Michal was passed around by her father to another man for a political marriage, and then back to David to add legitimacy to his kingship. So if Michal is not smiling, I think I get it. Sometimes the only power we can access is the power of our private thoughts.

In a kingdom of complex opinions about the king, the Ark represented a power that could unify them: the idea of the presence of God. However, David and all of Israel risked mistaking a physical object for God, instead of letting righteous actions demonstrate their faithfulness for God. We do this even today. In the United States, a mythology around the Ten Commandments has become popularized, to the point that the state of Alabama passed a law allowing the Ten Commandments to be posted in public schools, and Louisiana a similar law, except that law requires the Ten Commandments to be placed in every public school classroom. Take note that Louisiana ranks 49th in the nation for public school performance, and Alabama ranks 46th. These states fail their children, and then look to the Ten Commandments to save them.

Is the real measure of the power of our religion something that can be printed on a piece of paper, engraved on a tablet, or even enshrined in an Ark? Ultimately, the power of our faith can be measured by what we do with it.

Will we use it to control others, or will we use it to help others become more free?

Will we use the power of our faith to tell more lies, or will we use it to tell the truth-- even when we are scared to do so?

Will we use the power of our faith to hide us behind comfortable notions of God being on our side, or will the power of our faith inspire us to head to uncomfortable places, crossing boundaries in order to understand and find empathy for those who are different from us?

We all have power. Many of us may not know how powerful we really are. There is the power that our society may grant us, or may take away from us—depending on many factors of identity, race, gender, and class. But there is also a power that comes from God. That power is something that no one can give or take away from us. How will you access it? How will you use it?

There are probably situations in your life right now where you long to have more power. Take a moment to consider what those may be.

(Take moment of silence)

May you be guided by the holy to find your power, and also to use it righteously.