

“Power Brokers”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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II Cor. 12:2:1-10

Mark 6:14-29

‘And the king was stricken with regret because of
his thoughtless oaths and his powerful guests,
but he was not willing to go back on his words.’

Mark 6:26

Let us pray... O God,
Help us in the midst of the great powers of life that shape
our laws, our finances, our commerce, our place under the sun.

Amen

It’s been a very long time since I visited NYC,
but I remember one of the first times I went to ‘The City’
on my own as a young person,
I was trying hard not to gaze up in wonder at its huge buildings!
I didn’t want people to think I was a tourist or an ‘easy mark’ –
you know, maintaining my ‘street face’.
Well this week, even the locals got caught up with the wonder of
New York streets...

There is an environmental phenomenon that happens in NYC
for two days in May and two days in July.
It is nicknamed, ‘Manhattan-henge’ and is the result of the sun setting
directly in line with any street lying on the east-west grid
so that the buildings on either side
are brilliantly obfuscated by light so as to appear
like a canyon of steep cliffs.

The name ‘Manhattan-henge’ is a reference to the stone circle in England
called Stonehenge, which is thought to have been
constructed by prehistoric people to mark the movement of
the sun, moon, and stars for their religious festivals.

The excitement this past week of people trying to photograph –
or just see this event at the height of rush hour traffic
is evident that we are not so far removed from our ancestors
in their awe of natural phenomena and powers beyond our control.

But it is what happens in those megaliths of
steel girders and stone, brick and mortar
that has been even more overwhelming...

Willard, p.2

Our civilization is problematic right now with the current economic crisis as being the prime example of just how overwhelming those powers can seem to be.

According to John Dominic Crossan – author of God & Empire and one of the foremost ‘Jesus Seminar’ scholars, comparisons can be drawn between The United States and that age-old ‘Empire’ of Rome.

Just as Rome wasn’t built in a day, both are held together with its troops at the borders and everything within, integrated.

Quoting another source, Crossan acknowledges that there are 4 types of power needed to do this – military, economic, political, and ideological.

Then, Crossan points out that the attacks against our country on Sept. 11, 2001 targeted the Pentagon, the Trade Center, and either the White House or the Capitol representing 3 of the 4 centers of our nation’s power.

But the terrorists left the 4th – the ideological, up to us to compromise ourselves.

Crossan goes on to say that the Roman Empire was confronted by Jesus and the early Christians – not by military might, economic monopoly, or political power, but only ideologically, the ‘marketplace of ideas’.

And they sought to transform society – not to destroy it, which is pretty much what Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King had as their goals in their respective homelands.

These are still works in progress in India and the United States, but also the remnants of that Empire in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

And though the agenda of realizing God’s Kingdom of Heaven on Earth seems ambiguous if not contradictory in the Bible and Church tradition, human society seems to be making progress towards justice and equality.

Though we are not there yet and – given the misdeeds of Wall Street, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, and a polarized political landscape, it is important to practice the faith, hope, and love of our Christian heritage *anyway*.

Willard, p.3

The principal thoroughfare at the US Military Academy at West Point
is Thayer Road and the light of the late afternoon sun
to illuminate the great, grey stone buildings that line either side
much like the way that 'Manhattan-henge' was described.
There is a marvelous difference though – in that there are
huge oak or sycamore trees along both sides of that avenue.
They have become tall, gnarled, and resilient through the years –
but it is their defiance of the stone that makes this a striking image.
It speaks of that life that reaches up despite the confines
of commerce & conformity to courageously affirm itself no matter what.

Jesus proclaimed an alternative wisdom to transform society – an alternative
to the common sense wisdom of playing by the rules just to get by.
As Christians, we are called to enter into relationship with God
and in the process, practice compassion in our social dealings
through forgiveness & generosity which is pretty much summed up
in "The Paradoxical Commandments" by Dr. Kent M. Keith –
this is also called the "Anyway" poem...

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down

by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.

Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.

Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you have anyway.

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Amen

*Our lesson today is from I Corinthians 12:2-10
in which the Apostle Paul speaks about the wonders of heaven,
but reminds us that- especially in the midst of our weaknesses,
God through Christ strengthens with us.*

12:2 I know about one of Christ's followers who was
taken up into the third heaven fourteen years ago.

I don't know if the man was still in his body when it happened,
but God certainly knows.

3 As I said, only God really knows if this man
was in his body at the time.

4 But he was taken up into paradise,
where he heard things that are too wonderful to tell.

5 I will brag about that man, but not about myself,
except to say how weak I am.

6 Yet even if I did brag, I would not be foolish.
I would simply be speaking the truth.

But I will try not to say too much.

That way,

none of you will think more highly of me than you should because
of what you have seen me do and say.

7 Of course, I am now referring to the wonderful things I saw.
One of Satan's angels was sent to make me suffer terribly,
so that I would not feel too proud.

8 Three times I begged the Lord to make this suffering go away.

9 But he replied,

"My kindness is all you need.

My power is strongest when you are weak."

So if Christ keeps giving me his power,

I will gladly brag about how weak I am.

10 Yes, I am glad to be weak or insulted or mistreated
or to have troubles and sufferings, if it is for Christ.

Because when I am weak, I am strong.

Inspired by Mark 6:14-29

Herod Antipas the Potentate heard the name of 'Jesus' being bantered about
by some who said,

“John the Baptist must be back from the dead
and it is through him that these wonders are brought about!”

Others were saying Jesus was Elijah and still others said,

“He’s a prophet like the prophets of old.”

And Herod said,

“It is the one whom I beheaded. John, is raised from the dead!”

For Herod himself had ordered John’s arrest and sent him in chains to jail,
because Herod had married Herodias,

even though she was his brother Phillip’s wife.

So, John had said to Herod,

“It’s not right for you to be sleeping with your brother’s wife!”

Therefore, Herodias was in a bad position politically because of him
and she would kill him if she could get the chance.

But Herod was afraid of John

because he knew he was a righteous and holy person.

He observed all that John was doing, but when Herod heard him,
he actually liked what John was saying.

However, it came about that Herodias would have her opportunity on Herod’s birthday
when he hosted a big feast for the leading businessmen, high-ranking officers,
and civic leaders of Galilee.

Then... the daughter... of Herodias... entered...

and she did a bellydance that pleased Herod and all of his guests.

Herod blurted out to the girl,

“Ask me for whatever you want!

I swear, if you’d ask for something, I’d even give you half my kingdom! ”

So, she went to her mother and asked,

“What shall I ask for?”

And Herodias said,

“The head of John the Baptist.”

And right away she returned and paying her respects to the king, made her request,

“I would like you to give me... right now, on a platter...
the head of John the Baptist.”

And the king was stricken with regret because of

his thoughtless oaths and his powerful guests,
but he was not willing to go back on his words.

So right then, Herod ordered a royal guardsman

to bring back the head of John the Baptist –

and he went and beheaded John in the prison.

Then he carried back the head on a platter and presented it to the girl –
who gave it to her mother.

When John’s followers heard about this,

they came and carried his body away and placed it in a tomb.