

“Empire and Community”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sun./Pentecost  
1 Samuel 8:6-20  
Mark 3:20-35

*Samuel was upset to hear the leaders say they wanted a king,  
so he prayed about it. The LORD answered:  
Samuel, do everything they want you to do.  
I am really the one they have rejected as their king.*

*1 Samuel 8:6<sup>b</sup>-7*

Let us pray... O God,  
Can we be a thriving “Empire”  
that is also an ethical “Community”?  
Can we maintain the infrastructure of our society’s achievements  
and make room for new growth?  
Can we be a diverse multitude and accept each other as family?

Amen

“Empire and Community” – this is a theme that has been with me  
to reflect upon for a while now.

If we believe that God is a God of justice & peace,  
then it makes sense that God would be concerned about  
the differences and the possibilities of “Empire and Community”,  
and that this would be represented in the life stories of Jesus...

“Empire and Community” was the title for a sermon I gave  
back in October last year using the Gospel text of Matthew 22:15-22  
Jesus responding to a challenge to say something about  
whether or not to pay taxes to Rome.

He asked for a coin and whose image was on it, and then he said,  
“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.”  
Jesus was clever in not picking a side on this sensitive issue,  
basically implying that people have a civic responsibility  
to cooperate with their government,  
but that it all still belongs to God and there are consequences  
as we believe that God is a God of justice...

The relationship between “Empire” and “Community” has always been perilous,  
Ruling powers and religion, church and state are like oil and water,  
even dangerous when the two are forced to be unified.

They have different goals and the extremes of either one leads to tyranny,  
and there are plenty of examples of this throughout the world right now.

Willard, p.2

In 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, we learn that the people of Israel desired to become a nation-state like other nations, and so they did, choosing Saul who faltered in his leadership, though Israel would flourish under David and his son, Solomon.

Israel became its own 'Empire', but was devastated and dominated, over and over again by other empires:

First, the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, until they were freed by the Persians,

but then the Greeks followed, and finally the Romans who would disperse the Jewish people into exile.

So, becoming an 'Empire' nation-state would have its consequences.

Though it may seem obvious that there is a distinction – even a competition between Empire and Community,

this tension between the two didn't come into focus for me until I heard a presentation by author Thom Hartmann

about his book, The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight, which I then read.

Initially, he was talking about oil as a cheap source of energy

that gave rise to an exponential increase in human populations –

but this happened too fast and looking ahead to the future, oil as the world's principal energy source is not sustainable.

He said the same thing about drinkable water as a resource

that will not be as available as it is now in the future...

that is, if we don't do something as a community – and we can.

After presenting such a gloomy picture of the future –

Thom Hartmann then described what we can do about it.

He talked about lessons to be learned from ancient traditional cultures –

and particularly, about the role that women had played.

Not long afterwards, a friend introduced me to a book by David Korten called,

The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community,

where the author expanded on these opposing worldviews.

He characterized 'Empire' by the mechanisms of division and domination

to expand in power and real estate, while being maintained by violence.

As an alternative in contrast, Korten refers to 'Earth community'

as being diverse, interconnected, interdependent – and again,

with women in prominent roles of leadership,

and mutually supportive goals for all.

Korten – like Hartmann, lays out a gloom and doom scenario,

but at the same time, tells us that we can do something about it

politically, socially, technologically, and environmentally.

Willard, p.3

Then, I was amazed to hear very similar concepts coming from Dominic Crossan who is a contemporary Christian theologian and author, basically saying the same things about the Roman Empire's activity of domination through predatory economics and military violence; and that Jesus was killed for his radical vision of a social alternative – an inverted 'Kingdom' where the first shall be last and the last, first.

It is dangerous to threaten an Empire's balance of power as any whistleblower knows.

It has been 50 years since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr was assassinated, The assassination of Bobby Kennedy took place the same year, 1968.

Later in December of that year, Thomas Merton – a Roman Catholic monk who was a peace activist and writer, died under mysterious circumstances.

What all three had in common was their opposition to the Vietnam War.

It is not clear who or what group may have been involved, except that these three deaths served the goals of division and domination and prolonged our society's journey to that Beloved Community that is yet possible.

The naming, blaming, and shaming of scapegoats and their assassination legitimized as "sacrifice" serve as very real mechanisms for maintaining the balance of power of 'Empires'.

That tension with the Judean authorities arises early in the Gospel of Mark and in today's Gospel story, we have an example of how Jesus' opponents tried to create doubt about him by misrepresenting him as evil.

It is what young people call 'throwing shade' on someone.

Jesus can handle himself, though, and he strikes back with the 'sword of his mouth' – with spontaneous parables like a rapper at a poetry slam.

He was outraged to be slandered in this way, and his reaction was so strong that his family feared he had gone out of mind, and they went out to him.

But they could not reach him because of all the people there, and when someone told him his family was waiting for him, Jesus regained his composure and responded with beautiful words that embraced all the people there, along with his desperate family.

"Here is my mother and brothers and sisters!"

Seeing one another as family is the model God had for Israel – and still for us, as an alternative to the Empire's business as usual.

We are intended to be like a family – to embrace one another in an integrated relationship of mutuality and respect as human beings who are family...

Willard, p.4

[Jesus warned,]

*A nation whose people fight each other won't last very long.*

*And a family that fights won't last long either. [Mark 3:24-25 CEV]*

So, the question is:

Can an "Empire" and "Community" co-exist and co-operate

in an ethical, appropriate way without compromising one another?

Or will the division continue and bring down the whole house?

The motto of the Corps of Cadets at West Point is: "Duty, Honor, Country"  
and that is best expressed in the school song:

*Hail, Alma Mater dear, To us be ever near,*

*Help us thy motto bear Through all the years.*

*Let duty be well performed, Honor be e'er untarned,*

*Country be ever armed, West Point, by thee.*

'Duty' means the responsibility to act in support of an assigned mission.

'Honor' is the commitment to personal integrity as a professional.

'Country' is the totality of who and what is to be defended.

Sometimes, not all missions in the name of our country  
have been worthy of those who – by their profession,  
are sworn to do their duty and carry out those missions.

Injustices committed in our nation's history that involved breaking up families  
in the name of our country's 'national defense' and 'rule of law'  
is a compromise of both these concerns,  
and not unlike misrepresenting the name of God as the worst sin.

If we made supporting families – and specifically, 'children', our top priority.  
wouldn't we find that all other issues are derived from that one concern –  
the future generation?

If we made supporting all people's children of all nations, our top priority,  
wouldn't we find *that* to be everyone's common concern in the world?

Wouldn't that be our best strategy for national defense,  
for maintaining the rule of law, and even as the best reason for disarmament  
from weapons, nuclear to semi-automatic?

Jesus asked,

"Who are my mother and brothers and sisters?"

He might as well have asked,

"Who are my children?" as if to get us to ask the same questions...

Amen

*Our lesson from 1 Samuel 8:6-20, describes how the people of ancient Israel began the transformation from a tribe to a nation-state.*

*God will support them in their request,  
but warns them that there will be a cost...*

<sup>6</sup> Samuel was upset to hear the leaders say they wanted a king,  
so he prayed about it. <sup>7</sup> The LORD answered:

Samuel,  
do everything they want you to do.

I am really the one they have rejected as their king.

<sup>8</sup> Ever since the day I rescued my people from Egypt,  
they have turned from me to worship idols.

Now they are turning away from you.

<sup>9</sup> Do everything they ask,  
but warn them and tell them how a king will treat them.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel told the people who were asking for a king  
what the LORD had said:

<sup>11</sup> If you have a king, this is how he will treat you.

He will force your sons to join his army.

Some of them will ride in his chariots, some will serve in the cavalry,  
and others will run ahead of his own chariot.

<sup>12</sup> Some of them will be officers in charge of a thousand soldiers,  
and others will be in charge of fifty.

Still others will have to farm the king's land and harvest his crops,  
or make weapons and parts for his chariots.

<sup>13</sup> Your daughters will have to make perfume  
or do his cooking and baking.

<sup>14</sup> The king will take your best fields,  
as well as your vineyards, and olive orchards  
and give them to his own officials.

<sup>15</sup> He will also take a tenth of your grain and grapes  
and give it to his officers and officials.

<sup>16</sup> The king will take your slaves and your best young men and your donkeys  
and make them do his work.

<sup>17</sup> He will also take a tenth of your sheep and goats.

You will become the king's slaves,

<sup>18</sup> and you will finally cry out for the LORD  
to save you from the king you wanted.

But the LORD won't answer your prayers.

<sup>19-20</sup> The people would not listen to Samuel.

"No!" they said. "We want to be like other nations.

We want a king to rule us and lead us in battle."

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Mark 3:20-35[CEV]

<sup>20</sup> Jesus went back home, and once again such a large crowd gathered that there was no chance even to eat.

<sup>21</sup> When Jesus' family heard what he was doing, they thought he was crazy and went to get him under control.

<sup>22</sup> Some teachers of the Law of Moses came from Jerusalem and said, "This man is under the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons! He is even forcing out demons with the help of Beelzebul."

<sup>23</sup> Jesus told the people to gather around him. Then he spoke to them in riddles and said: How can Satan force himself out?

<sup>24</sup> A nation whose people fight each other won't last very long.

<sup>25</sup> And a family that fights won't last long either.

<sup>26</sup> So if Satan fights against himself, that will be the end of him.

<sup>27</sup> How can anyone break into the house of a strong man and steal his things, unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can take everything.

<sup>28</sup> I promise you that any of the sinful things you say or do can be forgiven, no matter how terrible those things are.

<sup>29</sup> But if you speak against the Holy Spirit, you can never be forgiven. That sin will be held against you forever.

<sup>30</sup> Jesus said this because the people were saying that he had an evil spirit in him.

<sup>31</sup> Jesus' mother and brothers came and stood outside.

Then they sent someone with a message for him to come out to them.

<sup>32</sup> The crowd that was sitting around Jesus told him,

"Your mother and your brothers and sisters<sup>[g]</sup> are outside and want to see you."

<sup>33</sup> Jesus asked,

"Who is my mother and who are my brothers?"

<sup>34</sup> Then he looked at the people sitting around him and said,

"Here are my mother and my brothers.

<sup>35</sup> Anyone who obeys God is my brother or sister or mother."