PARTIES AND Power

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

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Today our reading from Second Samuel continues the story of King David. He is king. Now he brings the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant held the tablets with the Ten Commandments. It also included materials for the sides of a tent and tent coverings. This is so that the Ark could be moved. The Ark was symbolic. The Israelites believed Yahweh’s presence dwelled in the Ark and the Ark had its own power.

Today’s reading in Second Samuel skips over a part of the Ark coming to the city of King David. We read how King David secures the Ark and then the oxen carrying the cart slip. Then the lectionary skips several verses. We skip how Uzzah reached out to help the oxen and was struck down. King David is afraid of the power of the Ark and sends it off to Obed-Edom, a Philistine. The ark stays there until King David hears that Obed has been blessed because he has the Ark.

Then today’s reading picks up with King David retrieving the Ark and bringing it to Jerusalem. David knows the power of Yahweh and the Ark. It is not his power but Yahweh’s power. David is dancing before Yahweh with gratitude and joy. He wears an ephod which is symbolic of a priest. King David is both priest and king. David goes on the celebrate with the people feeding everyone. In this scene, King David knows the responsibility that comes with power. Great power is meant to be shared to help others. It should align with respect, dignity, justice, mercy, and truth.

Thinking of King David then we heard the story of King Herod. Herod was celebrating his birthday. He invited military commanders and the elite. Herod had his stepdaughter dance for his pleasure. In exchange for a dance, he promised to give her what she wanted. Herod was thinking of material goods. When she asked for the head of John the Baptist, he was backed into a corner. He had witnesses and needed to save his honor. I wish that he had said, “John is a man. His life is not mine to give”. But no, Herod, drunk with power, felt as though all things and all people were his to take. He used power to satisfy his own desires and for his own gain. Even a man’s life was his to take. The head of John the Baptist was a symbol of where unchecked power can lead. It leads to taking anything and all things. It leads to injustice. As believers in God, we work with God to give dignity and life to others.

Power is not a bad thing in and of itself. Humans have always had leaders. It is how the power is used and how the person with the power views the power. King David was joyous and grateful. He knew Yahweh gave him the power. He accepted it and then gave back to the people. He included the people in the celebration and provided expensive food for them to eat.

Herod saw the power as his to take and keep. His to lord over others. Herod was ruthless. He killed people who stood in his way including family members. He did not show gratitude for his power but an attitude that he deserved it. Herod was more concerned about saving his honor amongst his colleagues than about doing the right thing.

I thought a lot this week about power and the types of power. I thought about people with power. I doubt any of us will have the far-reaching power of King David or of Herod, but it is still easy for famous people or those in certain professions to acquire unchecked power. Think about sports’ stars, politicians, dictators, monarchs, religious leaders, movie stars, the rich from prominent families. The list could go on.

Back in June I started preaching on First Samual and the history of the monarchy with the Israelites. Remember? Yahweh was against having one centralized king. Why? Because when the Israelites were a tribal confederation the elders of each of the 12 tribes governed their own tribe. The elders would come together with the other tribes to settle differences with the help of a judge. The power was shared. There were checks and balances. For whatever reason, with humans whenever large amounts of power are concentrated in one area or with one person or family, it is not good. Too much power makes us greedy and selfish. Of course, there are those rare saints who have power and give it away by helping others.

We need to be aware of where we have power; in our families, our jobs, our resources, our race, our intelligence, our nationality…etc. Once we recognize where our power lies, we need to think about our relationship to our power and how we use it. Bishop Sparks always acknowledges the power he has as a white male in the United States. He also acknowledges the land we stand on as belonging to the Potawatomi. He acknowledges this because as a white male his ancestors used their power to take land and lives from others. Most of them did NOT use their power to help the Potawatomi. Of course there are always exceptions like Father Petit. So, as we go through the week, reflect on the power you have or don’t have. How do you use it or how is power denied to you? Be honest with yourself. If you are not using your power to stand up for others and for injustice, why? Are you afraid of what others may think? Are you afraid your friends will not approve? Also, please pay attention to what is happening in the world. Look at where power is being concentrated. Is that power for selfish gain or for the good of others?

What happened yesterday in Pennsylvania was awful. Our political discourse in this country is leading to violence and hate. But like King Herod, we have a choice in how we respond. Words matter. When I taught kindergarten, the first thing I taught them every year was to use your words. One student would cut in line in front of another student. The reaction would be to push or shove and then a fight would start. They didn’t communicate. It is a mistake to say our political life is separate from our religious life. Politics create the society that we live in; our rules, our economy, our justice system. Politics regulate our freedom or lack of freedom. Now instead of communicating, fighting and hate words are used. Have we forgotten our past? Have we forgotten that hate and violence can fracture us? We should be united right now. United in our compassion for the shooting victims including former President Donald Trump. We should be united in not wanting retaliation. Our concerns should be with the victims. We should also ponder how we got to this place.

Every Sunday we sit here. We pray for peace. We open hear God’s word. I preach on love, compassion, mercy, caring for the other person. I preach on these things because that’s who Jesus was. The problem is we hear these words and then we go out those doors. What is in our hearts? Do we try to see the other person’s point of view? Or the other political party? Do we make excuses? As your priest, I try to see all viewpoints. I try not to preach on politics but I must now condemn the hate speech, the violence, and the call for more violence. In this time, will we show the worst of us or the best of us? Will we be Jesus’s hands and feet in the world? Would Jesus recognize us as his followers? You have an opportunity now to model what we say here on Sundays.