

“A Different Kind of Power”
Luke 19:28–40
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For the past two months, along with the rest of the world, we have been watching the brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Most of us have tried to take our eyes off the horrific scenes of violence; we can only take so much, but we can’t avoid this historic event nor should we, if we care at all about the world in which we live.

A raw kind of power has been on display as Russian President Vladimir Putin has been willing to target civilian areas and bomb hospitals and schools. By all accounts, every kind of human rights violation has been part of the formula of trying to frighten the Ukrainian people into submission.

Back home in Russia, like most international bullies, Putin has tried to control the narrative by fabricating stories of Nazi rule in Ukraine (the same Ukraine than has a Jewish president), denying the atrocities, and arresting any journalist who does not go along with the formal state story — read “lies.”

To accomplish all of this, a leader must have political control, military strength, and economic backing. Putin has a measure of all of these, though his military strength is being tested by the resolve of the Ukrainians, and his financial backing is being attacked by most of the international community. Yet he is experiencing a kind of success with this display of raw power.

There have been people, even at the top level of our national life, who have admired Putin, considered him to be a strong leader, but most consider his approach to be evil. It was nineteenth-century British historian and politician Lord John Dalberg-Acton who said in a letter written to Bishop Mandell Creighton that power tends to corrupt, but absolute power corrupts absolutely. He was talking about the abuse of power by past rulers, especially popes, but we also see this dynamic at work in the invasion of Ukraine. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The irony is that there are limits to what this kind of power can accomplish. Setting aside all ethical and religious critiques, there are practical problems with raw power. Force can create fear and, with enough military

strength, allow an aggressor to take control of people for a time, but the time will always be limited because fear can never inspire loyalty and devotion. We learned this, though we have yet to fully acknowledge our learning, in Afghanistan and Iraq.

We should not equate these invasions with what is happening in Ukraine. There was provocation, whether we think the scale of response was appropriate or not, and there were not rampant human rights violations, though there was “collateral damage” at times and some rogue actors. But while the realities were different, we did take over by force, and force alone could not inspire something different and better. Fear can never inspire loyalty and devotion. That requires a different kind of power.

Jesus displays a different kind of power throughout his life and ministry in our reading today from Luke, the traditional Palm Sunday narrative. The story begins with this simple transition statement, “After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.”

Jerusalem is “up” in terms of geography, it is about 2,500 feet above sea level, and spirituality, it is the holy city. But the beginning words of transition — after he had said this — refer to Jesus’ parable about a ruler who rewards slaves who generate income for him and threatens those who do not want him to be their king. He demands that the latter be brought before him and then slaughtered in his presence.

Thus, this simple transition statement frames the Palm Sunday story with a question, “What kind of king will Jesus be and what kind of power will he use?” Will he be like the ruler in the parable, rewarding his friends and killing off his enemies, or will he be a different kind of ruler using a different kind of power?

He enters town in royal fashion and in keeping with prophetic hope for a messiah. He rides on a colt and people lay down cloaks and shout, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!” Some Pharisees ask him to leave, and this may be out of jealousy for the attention he is getting, but it may also be out of concern for his life. The Romans don’t tolerate any hint of rebellion. In fact, it is highly unusual that they allow this procession to happen, so much so that some scholars have questioned the historicity of this story, though it may simply

mean the Romans know Jesus is not the kind of public figure who threatens them.

But the big picture is this — Jesus enters town like some kind of prophetic leader and the people respond with praise and adoration, Luke says, because of all the deeds of power they had seen Jesus perform. But what were these deeds, and what kind of power are we talking about?

The Greek word is *dunamis*, or *dunamein* in plural form, from which we get the word dynamite. Luke uses the word frequently. In Luke 4:14, Jesus is filled with the power of the Spirit. In Luke 4:36, Jesus uses his power to cast out other spirits and in Luke 5:17, this power enables him to heal people. In Luke 6:19 and 8:46, power comes out of Jesus when people touch him. In Luke 9:1, Jesus sends out the twelve with power to exorcise demons and heal people.

Jesus has the power to make things right; to heal broken hearts, minds, bodies and spirits; to pursue justice and righteousness; to work for peace and restore lives after violence. It is a different kind of power than what is displayed by Vladimir Putin and the ruler in Jesus' parable. It transforms not by force but by love. It is a kind of power many confuse with weakness, because it is willing to sacrifice for others. Yet it is the kind of power that inspires loyalty and devotion and thus makes possible a realm that is sustainable.

Jesus has no political standing. He has no army. If he had any money, he would give it away. He ends up dying on a cross. But while Rome and many other empires have come and gone, Jesus' realm exists to this day. In fact, it has over 2.3 billion citizens worldwide, in addition to those who have come before us and those who will follow us. There are different ways to measure power, but in terms of the capacity to inspire loyalty and devotion, Jesus' kind of power is pretty effective.

So, what is the message for us? It's partly about the character of Jesus and thus the character of God. God is all powerful. God could choose the methodology of force to usher in a righteous world. Reward the faithful, punish the sinners and be done with it! And to be clear, many people believe this is how God works, and there is scripture to support such thinking. We

read a text a few weeks ago in which the Apostle Paul talks about God zapping sinners left and right!

We may think we would like God to work this way, but are we sure we are among the righteous and not the sinners? Scripture is full of warnings for people who want to hasten the Day of the Lord, the great day of judgment, and there are plenty of them to this day. I received in the mail this week two copies of a thirty-one-page document predicting the rapture of the Christian church on May 11, 2024. To be fair, it is not meanspirited, but it predicts the end, something Jesus says he cannot do, and assumes a certain outcome for us. Scripture cautions against such predictions and assumptions, and simply calls for faithfulness.

The bottom line is that God chooses a different kind of power, not the way of force but the way of redeeming love, because loyalty and devotion cannot be inspired by force. Love cannot be coerced and it is love that God wants. It is a beloved community God seeks to build, not a gathering of obedient slaves. So, God limits God's power, allowing for our evil choices and their consequences. This causes sadness in the heart of God, but only those who are truly free can respond in love.

But there is another message for us in this story. The kind of power Jesus displays is the kind of power we are called to use as his followers. In today's reading from Philippians, the Apostle Paul calls us to seek the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but rather emptied himself into the form of a servant and became obedient to the point of death on a cross. That is how Jesus came to be highly exalted, Paul says, and that is the kind of life we are called to live, the kind of power we are called to use.

If we don't like the word "power," we can simply say "influence." How we change the world for the better is not by force but through acts of healing and compassion, not with violence but by restoring lives and working for peace, not by insisting on our way but by giving up our interests for others.

It may not seem like an effective way to lead and effect change, but consider the impact of people like Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Dr. King, Desmond Tutu. Who has changed the world for the better more than people like them? The world has an approach to power and leadership, and it has

methods to measure success, but very few things that really matter — like faith and love — can be reduced to simple metrics.

One of the most effective and beloved pastors I have known was the founding pastor at the church I served in Winston-Salem, Dr. Jack Noffsinger. Jack was a marine chaplain at Iwo Jima who left a church in Florida with several thousand members to come to Knollwood Baptist Church in 1957 when it had less than a hundred members meeting in a funeral home. What attracted him was the commitment to being a different kind of church, not majoring on minors but extending love and welcome. What he brought was deep love for people and the Gospel and a heart big enough to welcome all which led to racial reconciliation work, ecumenical relationships, coffeehouses and many other ventures.

Jack would not have checked all the boxes churches look for today. In fact, he told me that some people at Knollwood criticized him because he wasn't a strong leader. It was amazing, with such weak leadership, he said, that the church grew to 1,400 members, built numerous buildings on the eight acres of land it bought, and developed an incredible array of ministries. They didn't have great planning processes. And it is true that Jack spent little time in traditional leadership activities like working with committees. But it is amazing how much love, genuine Christlike love, can accomplish.

It is a different world today. Many people are not interested in church. But if anything will interest them, it won't be a set of strategies or just the right way of targeting them. It will be extending love to them and showing up where it matters in the community with love.

Love is the greatest power in the world and it is this power that Jesus brings. Ironically it is seen most clearly on the cross, God's identification with our suffering and offer of salvation. It is a different kind of power, not very impressive by the world's standards, but our greatest hope nonetheless.