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"Come away by yourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile!..." Mark 6:31
Are you ready to accept the invitation?

WHO'S GOT THE POWER?

Poor Jesus! Every time he asked his followers to be childlike they thought he meant childish – and so they were. “Jesus, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (*Mk. 9:38*). James and John: “Jesus, grant that we may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left when you enter into your glory” (*Mk. 10:37*). All of them: “A dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (*Lk. 22:24*). It’s enough to make a grown man (or Son of Man) cry!

And most of these are little more than squabbles over sandbox superiority: Who’s got the power? Who’s going to get the power? Who gets to use the power? The pursuit of position, prestige, power – especially power – was as much a preoccupation in the time of Jesus as it is today. Our language gives us away: We speak of going higher, climbing the ladder, achieving the top position. And all the while, Jesus is going the other way: coming down from heaven (as we say), refusing to cling to his equality with God (as Paul says), but rather emptying himself, becoming human in every way and in all things, even to the point of death on the cross (*Ph. 2:6-8*).

The power we pursue usually means power over others, the ability to make others (individuals, groups, nations) do what I (or we) want them to do. That is certainly one reason why positions of power can be so appealing, even seductive. The pursuit of power can become so taken for granted that it may not even occur to us that perhaps the most precious things in life are realities over which we are utterly powerless.

You might invite someone for coffee and conversation; you might leave a phone message or send an email; you might offer an expression of concern; but you cannot compel a response to any of these. In a variety of ways you might offer friendship, forgiveness, compassion, love – but you cannot force their acceptance, any more than you can force another person to offer them to you. These are gifts. We can only offer them as gifts, just as we can only receive them as gifts. In the face of what is most precious, we are most powerless.

As is God.

Jesus reveals God as offering us friendship, forgiveness, compassion, and above all, love – gifts that we are free to receive, or refuse. Jesus' humility is so great that he will not use his power to manipulate or coerce – or even to convince. Indeed, he never uses power over people (and thoroughly excoriates those, particularly the religious leaders of his time, who did so – *see Matthew 23 and Luke 11*). Rather, his power was for loving and serving, forgiving and freeing. And since we believe that Jesus reveals to us the face of God, then God's power must be the same.

In an age when we have become so aware of abuses of power in church and state, it is worthwhile remembering that Jesus too was tempted to abuse power, from the beginning of his ministry (“Throw yourself down from the Temple” – *Mt. 4:6*) to its climax (“Come down from the cross” – *Mt. 27:40-42*). We should not be surprised if (when) we too are tempted to use power for self-service, rather than the service of others. We are not much different from those first followers of Jesus. But he is patient with us, as he was patient with them.

To relinquish the pursuit of power requires us to trust in God every bit as much as children trust in loving parents. Not that children are without power – I have seen entire families reduced to a quivering mass of helplessness when faced with the power exercised by a two-year-old. We begin to learn lessons about power at a very early age! But we also begin to learn lessons about love and trust and forgiveness at a very early age. These lessons, even when they are not taught or learned perfectly (as they never are), begin to reveal something of God; and on that foundation, Jesus says, the kingdom of God is built. Power, its pursuit, and especially its abuse, is (according to Jesus) one of the greatest obstacles to the kingdom being a reality for us. That – and his own use of power as well as his willing embrace of powerlessness – should be enough to give us pause in our pursuit, to hear again those precautionary words of Jesus, and to let those words lead us to greater conversion in this critical area of our lives.