

The Stewardship of Power
July 6, 2003

This weekend we have been celebrating our nation's founding, as well as our usual summer pursuits with friends and family. No doubt you have paused to give consideration to the blessings God has showered on us. We of the United States are not only blessed with many material possessions, but also a beautiful country of amazing variety, and I appreciate and give thanks for the green trees, hills, and clear air here in Bear Creek and elsewhere in this corner of Pennsylvania. We as a nation have also been blessed. No war has been fought in our country since the Late Unpleasantness of the 1860's. No foreign power has ever subjugated us and reduced us to servitude, as has happened in other places even within our own memory. Indeed, we live in a place and in an era that has been rather unusual in history. We have freedom. Not a freedom from any and all responsibility, but a freedom to pursue life, liberty, and yes, even happiness. Who of antiquity would have imagined that? Only kings and emperors, perhaps, had such freedom then.

In today's scripture we go way back, to about 4 thousand years ago, where in Egypt the story of Joseph and his amazing slavery to ruler story has played out. You know the story. Favorite son Joseph is a brat. His brothers take advantage of an opportunity when he is away from his father Jacob's protection. They sell him into slavery, and he winds up in Egypt. There he has some rough times, but eventually comes to the attention of Pharaoh because he can interpret dreams. He then becomes Pharaoh's key advisor in managing Egypt's economy through seven years of plenty and then the subsequent famine. Eventually his brothers seek help and Joseph, through God's guidance and help, is there to save them. It is a wonderful story. If you have not seen the show "Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," do see it. It's really great fun.

But today we pick up where the show, and the story as it is usually told, leave off. I read from Genesis, Chapter 47, starting with verse 13. I am reading from the New Revised Standard Version.

Genesis 47: 13-21.

And now, one verse more, from Exodus, Chapter 1, Verse 8.

Exodus 1: 8: Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

You will recognize this last verse as the beginning of the Exodus story. That too is a wonderful story of how God, with a mighty hand, rescued his chosen, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt. But the link between these two stories is usually not mentioned. For, you see, it is Joseph who was responsible for his people, as well as the other Egyptians, being sold into slavery.

We should not be too critical of Joseph. He was faithful to God, and with God's help saved his people. He forgave his brothers. Remember what the children of Israel were at the time. They were, literally, the children, grandchildren, and perhaps some great grandchildren of Jacob, renamed Israel. They were a wandering nomadic tribe. Not even a third world nation of their day. Egypt was a superpower. The Egyptians knew how to manage things, on large scale.

How else do you build pyramids? What Joseph does is harness this power, the stewardship of Egyptian power, for the benefit of his people. Yes, they became slaves. But Joseph himself was still technically a slave, and so would be everyone else in Egypt except the priests, and they too served at the pleasure of Pharaoh. If everybody is a slave, and you control or at least have a lot of influence with the slavemaster, Pharaoh, then slavery is not so bad maybe. He has the responsibility. It's his job to manage everything. Everything went well with this arrangement. We can read further in Genesis that the Israelites prospered, and became a large in numbers.

But then new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

That is one of the problems with slavery, you see. No matter how benevolent the master, others follow who may not be so benevolent. As long as the pharaoh, or king, or emperor, or dictator, governs well, and is obedient to God's call, things can indeed go well. Slavery was the normal model for government in the ancient Middle East. The ruler was all powerful, subject only to whatever gods he might believe in, if any. If you can believe that the ruler will be responsible, and care for his people, then giving up power to him is a great temptation. The religions of the day said that yes, the king or pharaoh will care for you; it is your duty to obey. To Joseph, this system may have seemed like a good approach. To the Israelites, there wasn't much choice; they were starving. And it worked out for the best.

But then a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

Now slavery did not look so good. With God's guidance, Moses led them to freedom, out of the land of Egypt. But then amid the trials of the wilderness, the people complained that they were better off as slaves in Egypt. This happened again later, in Samuel's day, when the people of Israel wanted a king like the other nations. The king would then be the one to take responsibility for both their relationship to God and to foreign powers off of their shoulders. Samuel warned them that the king would make them subjects, tax them, and enlist their children to be his servants. (Notice the difference, that we today use the term citizens, rather than subjects, to refer to our relationship to the government. The term "subject" is accurate for that time.) They had to have a king. King David in many ways fulfilled the positive expectations about what a king should be. He was faithful to God, and to his responsibility to his people. But there followed Solomon, who set heavy taxes and drafted workers for his building projects. And many others. Of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, not one king would be judged "good" by the writer of the books of Kings in our Bible, and relatively few kings would be considered "good" in the Kingdom of Judah.

Again and again, a new king arose, who did not know Joseph. Kings who put themselves above responsibility to their people, and to God. Does this kind of thing still happen today? Yes, I believe it does.

It is sometimes said that the best form of government is a benevolent dictatorship. But what about the next dictator or, in the case of Israel, king? It seems only a matter of time. Eventually the sense of responsibility for the well-being of his subjects is replaced by the sense of responsibility only for the king's own well-being. Or his dynasty. And most of all, his continued control of power. It happened in Israel, and many, many times thereafter. The ultimate result? For the Israelites, a grinding poverty for most amid extravagant riches for a few, and ultimate disaster. Israel fell to the Assyrians in 721 BC and Jerusalem to the Babylonians in

586 BC . The Children of Israel found themselves in abject, captive slavery again. The system had failed. The institution of an earthly king who would bear the burden of responsibility had failed. But God was still with them.

This time they learned something. The Jews, as they became known, did not have a king, although Herod later gave himself that title. Indeed, except for a brief period under the Maccabees, they were not even independent. The Jewish religious leaders erected a system of laws that would be their guardian. By the time of Jesus, this system of law has been expanded and subverted to the point where it has become an instrument of oppression. The system profited the high priest, the other priests who were custodians of the temple, and well connected families. Obedience to the letter of the law was supposed to ensure one was right with God, but the Law was twisted for evil purposes. This system for shifting responsibility was flawed, as the institution of kingship had been earlier. Jesus pointed out corruption within this system; he would not be a slave to it. The early church continued to struggle with this issue. We hear Paul in our next scripture passage from Galatians, Chapter 5, verse 1. The church Paul had founded in Galatia had been visited by others who have told them that they must be obedient to all of the Jewish Law to be Christians. Paul answers:

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Galatians 5: 1, NRSV

We too must guard against the temptations of slavery. No, it does not now go by that politically incorrect name. But in times of crisis, there is the temptation to turn to a human being who will rescue us from responsibility. Or some other system, that will do the same. The potential cost is freedom. We as citizens of the United States of America can be proud to have stood for the cause of freedom, and our endeavor to free other peoples from the clutches of servitude. Truly God has been with us, and has blessed us even as we as a nation have been faithful to this calling.

This issue occurs at a more personal level as well. For example, there was a time in this country when the youngest child in a family was expected to stay home and be a servant to the parents, even while the other children made new lives on their own. This could be a form of slavery, if that son or, more typically, daughter, was denied the opportunity or resources to make any other choice. What could hold a daughter in such servitude? Fear of social ostracism or disinheritance could do it. In our time, people continue in jobs they detest when fear of joblessness is a credible threat. A manager can take advantage of such fears, and this happens. The message is, “You are so worthless that you would not be able to find another job; I keep you on out of kindness, but my kindness has its limits. Now get to work!” Maybe not so bluntly stated. This is not slavery in a technical sense, since the person so captured must give up his or her initiative, and freedom, in order for it to succeed. But this happens. Often we give these strategies names, such as “guilt trip.” Even the church, at times, has not been above such strategies that would use such power as a lever to force compliance or contributions.

Paul cautions us not to give up our freedom in the interest of security. However, sometimes we do not see a choice. Like Joseph’s brothers and the Egyptians, we are given the choice of slavery or starvation. This happens too. Good people stay in a broken marriage for the sake of the children. An employee keeps the job because the family must be fed. We can be forced to assume duties we hate or dread in the family because it is expected, and we are

unwilling to have it said that we are other than a faithful son or daughter, or church member, or Christian.

It is a bit ironic that in our land of freedom, our many possessions can hold us. We are unwilling to risk alienating the rich uncle who is so demanding but promises to remember us in his will. We can even be trapped by a love of possessions; we must provide for them proper display, and keep them in Mint-In-Box condition to retain their value. Yes, folks, I know about that one! Here we are, a free people politically, yet trapped in servitude on an every-day practical level.

The good news in the Bible is that God cares for the powerless, for the slave, for the victim of oppression. God heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt, and sent Moses. He heard the cries of people oppressed by kings of Israel and Judah, who did not heed their duty, and sent prophets. God heard the cries of the captives in Babylon, and sent both prophets and eventually opportunity to return to Jerusalem.

God's love for the powerless came home to me most vividly in a commentary on the Beatitudes by Barkley. We hear Jesus say "Blessed are the Poor, for Theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." This is sometimes translated "poor in spirit." I'd like to elaborate a bit, borrowing from Barkley's commentary. For "poor", the word used is the Greek term for abject poverty, not just the working poor. The Hebrew equivalent word that Jesus would have used went through four stages of meaning. First, it simply meant poor. Then, since poor, therefore having no influence, power, or prestige. Further, since having no influence, downtrodden by men. Finally, because so poor as to have no earthly resources or influence whatever, wholly dependent upon God, and left with no alternative but to put all trust in God. Jesus says such a person is to be considered blessed. Material resources and earthly power are no substitute for faith and trust in God. This is good news to the captive, and to the slave. It is good news to us when we are trapped in whatever system of cruelty has ensnared us, even if it is of our own making. Jesus calls to us. I read from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 11, verses 28 to 30:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. Matt 11: 28-30

So, take seriously the stewardship of power. In this country we have the power of free speech, the right to vote, and the many other powers we have as citizens. If you have political power, and we do, use it for good. Perhaps more immediately important, if you have power at the personal level, use it for good as well. Use your influence to liberate and encourage and empower others, rather than to bend others to your will. Expect and encourage others to do the same.

If you find yourself without power, God loves you, and seeks your release. Ultimately, power, as well as wealth and health, is something we all lose. As he prepared to return to God after the resurrection, Jesus told Peter this after charging him with the care of his sheep. I read from the gospel of John, chapter 21, verse 18:

“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”

While Jesus may have been referring to Peter’s martyrdom in Rome, is this not the case for us? But we know we are the beloved of God, and that He has prepared a place for us when we have lost all of our power, even the power to live, here on Earth. He will call us to himself. As the angel tells John the message from Jesus in the Revelation, Chapter 22, verse 17:

The spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. Revelation of John, Chapter 22: 17

The living water of eternal life is freely given by God to all who would be His children. All we must do is accept it.

Amen.