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July 2, 2006  
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## **The Power of Each Person** **John 18: 33-38**

Our political system, what we call the “American experiment,” is founded on a belief in the importance, worth, value and power of each individual. I find it ironic that Thomas Jefferson, often depicted as skeptical about religious claims, turned to theology as the foundation of human rights: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal *and are endowed by their Creator* with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Ultimately, Jefferson admitted, human rights are rooted in the priority of divine grace. What Jefferson said *politically* in fact echoed what the Baptists of that era were saying *theologically*, that God has endowed each person with competency of soul, capable of exercising discernment, able to make decisions of conscience, able to wrestle with matters of ultimate concern. That’s why we as Baptists embrace the notion of the priesthood of all believers, asserting that every person who is open to the Spirit of God can further the divine kingdom. Baptists and Jefferson agreed that political rights ultimately root in divine authority. Indeed, when Jefferson asserted, “All people are created equal,” he assumed that all people bear the mark of God’s creation. Therein their claim to equality lies.

The twentieth century was a referendum on the feasibility of government by the people, a referendum on the advisability of democracy. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a fierce debate among political theorists about whether democracy or dictatorship was not only the most efficient form of government but whether democracy or dictatorship was the best guarantor of human rights. A number of theorists argued that only centralized authority could safeguard the order and stability of society and protect the autonomy of the individual. There were many who believed that “rule by the people” could only eventuate in anarchy. Moreover, there were many who believed that democracy could not summon the collective strength sufficient to defeat the implacable designs of a dictatorship. Hitler boasted before the Battle of Britain, “Three weeks and England’s neck will be wrung like a chicken’s.” But the “chicken” proved capable of more blood, sweat, toil and tears than the dictator imagined possible. The late Michael Novak, former winner of the Templeton Prize for progress in religion observed, “Democracies proved that they had the will, the audacity, and the stamina to defeat the principle of dictatorship. They defeated it so decisively that today hardly a dictator anywhere . . . dares to argue that dictatorship is an ideal form of government.” In practice, history discovered the hard way that it was dictatorships, not democracy, that led straightway to the abrogation of human rights. Democracy is based on the power, the importance, the worth and value of the individual!

If the twentieth century was a referendum on the best possible political system, it was also a referendum on the best possible economic system.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a fierce debate: does a free market economy best serve the needs of human beings, or does a centrally-run economy, managed from the top-down, provide for society best?

Many theorists thought that socialism was preferable to capitalism in every way.

It took a century, but history delivered a clear verdict: a system that rewards creativity, that rewards individual initiative, talent and achievement, is the system that best meets the needs of human beings.

I offer the nation of India as a great example.

At the end of the Second World War, having just gained political freedom, the leaders of India sent their top economists to the Soviet Union to study that nation's centrally-planned economy.

They brought back an economic system that was centrally managed from the top-down.

Their entire economic infrastructure from 1947 to 1991 was government-owned.

They discovered a great lesson: the Soviet system was a great way to keep almost everybody poor.

At the end of that era India was virtually bankrupt, with one billion dollars in foreign assets.

Finally, the Indian government said, 'Alright: let us let our people be free to use their own creativity, talents, and initiative to create whatever kind of economic gain they can.'

Within fifteen years the country went from one billion dollars in foreign currency to \$118 billion – and rising,

simply by allowing people to maximize their ambition and talents.

An economic system that allows for creativity and individual initiative is not perfect.

It must be regulated. It is a system that is often messy.

But it has shown itself to be the best system yet devised for creating the most wealth for the most people.

The ability to make decisions of conscience, the ability to form political judgments, the ability to create economic wealth – all of these abilities are among the great powers of a human being.

But there is an even greater power that has been given to us, a power that this extraordinary encounter between Jesus and Pilate brings to the fore.

Jesus is the epitome of a spiritual creature. Pilate is a pure pragmatist.

Jesus is trying to alert the world to the reality of ultimate redemption through relationship with God.

All Pilate wants to know is, Are you a threat to me? "Are you the King of the Jews?" he asks. Jesus answers, "If my kingship were of this world, my supporters would have fought. But it is not."

Pilate responds, "So you are a king?" "You say I am a king," says Jesus.

"I say I come to bear witness to the truth. *I am the truth.*"

"Ah," says Pilate wearily, "truth. What is the truth?"

My friends, the power to stand for truth, for eternal, universal truth, is among the greatest privileges

and responsibilities that we enjoy as a human being.

One of the world's great citizens is Vaclav Havel, the dissident playwright who became Czechoslovakia's

first democratically-elected president after his nation gained its independence from Soviet domination.

Shortly after his election, Havel shared one of the most extraordinary inaugural addresses that has ever been delivered.

He began by saying that for forty years his predecessors had taken the dais to speak of how the country is flourishing, of how much steel the country has produced, of how happy everyone is.

Then he said, you did not elect me to hear such lies again. Our country is *not* flourishing.

We have humiliated and exploited our people. We have spoiled our soil.

Our useless economy creates products nobody wants, yet proves unable to create things we need.

Worst of all, we live in a poisoned moral climate, because for so long we have become accustomed

to saying one thing and thinking another. We have lost our grasp of the truth.

There is but one wise course of action left, Havel said:

let us pattern our new society after Jesus and not Caesar.

Let us find once again truth, truth that inspires our politics, truth that inspires our lives, truth that moves us to transform our world.

They had lived for too long with Pilate's version of truth as something expedient and malleable.

Now they needed a truth that transformed and inspired. Now they needed the eternal truth of God.

Ah, Dr. Kremer, you can talk about the power of the individual all you want; it sounds lovely, but in today's modern world all of us are really nothing more than insignificant cogs in a great machine –

you and I are but one social security number among millions of numbers.

In truth, huge, nameless government bureaucracies run the world.

In truth, huge financial conglomerates dominate business. Some would say, looked at soberly, Pilate was right: truth is a relative term to be manipulated by the powers that be.

That's why George Orwell in his prophetic book *1984* placed Winston Smith in the Ministry of Love,

a torture chamber where Big Brother brainwashed him into believing that  $2 + 2 = 5$ .

Orwell was sure that eventually governments would become so big and powerful that they could make the truth whatever they decided it would be.

But George Orwell was in, fact, wrong. 1984 came and went. The power of the individual remains.

I think of a great encounter between the late Joseph Brodsky and a Soviet judge that serves as a modern-day version of the interplay that took place between Jesus and Pilate.

Joseph Brodsky would eventually win the Nobel Prize winner for literature,

but at that time he was a young, unknown, unpublished poet,

and a Soviet judge was interrogating him as a threat to the state.

The judge asked Brodsky, "What is your work?"

Brodsky replied: "I write poems. I translate. I believe . . ."

The judge: "There will be no 'I believe.'"

The judge: "Who deigned that you are poet? Who put you in the ranks of the poets?"

Brodsky: "Nobody. Who put me in the ranks of mankind?"

The judge: "Did you study for this? You never tried to finish college where they prepare . . ."

Brodsky: "I didn't think that this was a matter of education."

Judge: “How is that?”

Brodsky: “I thought . . . well, I thought it came from God.”

For that answer Brodsky spent five years in internal exile and was eventually banished from his country.

But he knew what Jefferson and those early Baptists knew, that God had given him competency of soul to think, to discern, to create – to write.

Within a few years the government that had sentenced Brodsky had collapsed, Brodsky’s words remain.

Never underestimate the power of a human being to stand for eternal truth.

Never underestimate the tenacity with which human beings will hold to, live for and die for truth.

I remember driving to Morganton for the burial of one of our church’s most unusual and special saints,

the late Buck Wortman. To reach the cemetery we had to turn on Sam Ervin Road.

Suddenly, I could hear in my head the Biblical pronouncement that that old Senator delivered at the end of the Watergate hearings. He said:

“Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. That which a man sows, that also shall he reap.”

The Big Brothers of the world have risen, but they have never been able to kill the truth and power

that allows people to discern and decide, to create and stand for that which is eternal.

Out of the Soviet Gulag rose an Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Out of the Holocaust came Elie Wiesel and Viktor Frankl.

Out of a Gestapo prison rose a Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Out of the hellhole of South Africa came Bishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela.

Out of a Birmingham jail came Martin Luther King Jr.

Each of these people found a truth for which they would live and for which they would die.

Pilate tries to bully Jesus: “Talk to me. Don’t you understand that I have the power to kill you?”

Jesus answers, “You have no power save what has been given you by God.”

Jesus stands against Pilate and the weight of his entire government,

just like that solitary Chinese dissident stood before that column of tanks in Tinnamen Square, emanating a power and truth that those machines could not match.

You could almost hear one of the tank commanders saying to that singular hero,

“Get out of the way, fool! Don’t you know we can crush you --and we will!”

Pilate says the same to Jesus: “Don’t you know that I can kill you?”

But Pilate and the tanks can only kill the man; they cannot kill the truth for which they stand!

The power to discern, the power to decide, the power to create, the power to stand for eternal verities,

the freedom to stand for that which matters – you can kill the man! – but such truth is not killable!

It is Independence Day weekend, and I suspect that sometime during the weekend some TV network

will show Stephen Spielberg’s horrific but mesmerizing masterpiece, *Saving Private Ryan*.

Toward the end of that movie, Tom Hanks, playing the role of his life,

a dying soldier who has given his life and those of his men to save another man’s life,

utters the two most powerful words of his distinguished acting career: “Be worthy. Be worthy.”

Be worthy of the mark of God that is upon your life!  
Be worthy of the power that God has given you, the power to discern, the power to decide,  
the power to create, the power to stand for eternal truth.  
Do you really believe that you are a person of power?  
Or do you only pretend to believe that you are a person of power,  
while you secretly really believe that your life is one of despair?  
“What is truth?” Pilate asks.  
“I am the truth!” says Jesus.  
It really does matter around which of those perspectives you orient your life.  
One represents a world of dead-end despair.  
The other points you toward a kingdom that has no end.  
Live worthy of the divine mark that your Creator has placed upon you.

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