

**17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Pentecost**  
**September 27, 2020**  
**Southampton, MA**

**Scripture:** Philippians 2:1-13

A fundamental Taoist question, “Which has a better chance of surviving a storm, a mighty oak tree or a young sapling?”

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Philippi from his imprisonment to thank them for their support. Which imprisonment, however, is not clear. What Paul made abundantly clear, though, was Christ’s example of humility, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness.” (2:6-7) By emptying himself of all aspects of his divinity, Jesus became the one to exalt, to whom every knee shall bend.

This hymn legitimated humility, servanthood, as the source of power. It implicitly rebuked Caesar, whom Roman authorities believed to be divine. When the gospel writers referenced “the kingdom God” or in Matthew’s case “the kingdom of heaven,” that reference was an explicit counterpoint to the Roman Empire. To the Jesus followers there was the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God. The small house churches in Paul’s day attracted people because they offered them the prospect of life liberated from the Empire’s oppression. The house church was a microcosm of the kingdom of God.

People knelt before Caesar because of his power. He had power economically and politically. He had power militarily. His brutal power oppressed the people at the bottom of Roman society. He had power to make or break someone. He could lavish prestige and wealth upon the people who supported him and curried favor with him. He could also punish people

who crossed him. His power gave him authority to rule to fulfill any whim, even if it was contrary to the common good.

Caesar ruled with fear, which was made real through violence. Regarding Nero who was Caesar during Paul's time, Tacitus wrote about Nero's hatred of Christians, "...an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty...Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as nightly illumination when daylight had expired."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus had power, too. He had healing powers. He had power to perform miracles. He also had power through his teachings, especially when he questioned the religious authorities. His gentle power galvanized people throughout Galilee and Judea, Jews and Gentiles, who took his teachings to heart. He offered them hope that an alternative kingdom to the Empire was possible. That power, also, brought about his execution on a cross, and later it led to Paul's imprisonment.

The difference between the power wielded by Caesar and the power wielded by Jesus was more than power enforced by fear and power generated by humility. People feared him because they had no security in their daily lives. Power through fear, while effective in the short run, would ultimately fail in the long run. Caesar's power was only effective as long as he controlled the levers of power. If someone came with more money or more weapons, that person could usurp his power. However, if they could feel secure, they could resist and see that wealth and weapons propped up Caesar's power. They potentially could rebel, which happened in the Jewish war from 66 to 70. The outcome destroyed the Second Temple and began the Jewish diaspora from Jerusalem, which did not end until 1948.

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<sup>1</sup> From **The New Testament Background Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins**. C.K. Barrett, Editor. HarperSanFrancisco. 1989 Page 16

Jesus, the son of God, emptied himself of his power and “became obedient to the point of death.” This gentle power grounded in humility succeeds in the long run. Ironically, it’s propped up by nothing, other than *agape*, love that God has for us and that we should have for one another. Furthermore, Jesus’ power did not promote himself over others, but sought to lift everyone up. Jesus’ power benefitted not himself or a cadre of sycophants and patrons, but all people who needed hope in their daily lives.

Gentle power from humility leads to transformative and lasting change. It also doesn’t lead to widespread instability and volatility. Rather, it fosters a sustainable way of daily living for the entire community.

Brutal power hurts lives and perpetuates fear and insecurity. And because it is propped up, it ultimately is insecure. Gentle power promotes life rooted in love. Love casts out fear. A community in which love prevails is the eternal life, the kingdom of God, Jesus promised.

Which is it, the mighty oak or the young sapling?