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SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO BUNT

John 18:1-14

I mentioned last week that we took care of our grandsons Wesley and Hunter a couple of weeks ago. Our experience dredged up a little vague and probably misplaced guilt I have. What provoked this memory was the battle of the kitchen table. Why is it so hard to get kids to eat? In a nation that has an abundance of people who eat too much, we can’t get some of our grandchildren to eat. Wesley has a palate of some chicken strips called Dino Chicken, macaroni and cheese, and French fries. That’s it. Lately he has included smoothies in his diet, though he is extremely particular about them. For some reason they have to be blue. Carissa adds blue food dye to them. This past week we took care of the boys one day and Carissa gave Laurie the exact recipe for the blue smoothie that he finds acceptable. Laurie followed it to the letter, but when she gave it to Wesley he said it tasted too green and wouldn’t eat it. How does something taste green?

This all caused me to recall that we fought this battle with our son, Toby. Toby has very large feet. The pediatricians predicted that he would be well over 6 feet tall because his feet were so big. He’s all done growing now, and he only made it to just about my height. He’s 5 feet, 10 inches tall, but he has size 14 feet. With feet that size he ought to be at least 6 feet 2 inches, probably more. That would have been a big help to him in his football playing days. My guilt comes in because Laurie and I could not get that kid to eat a single vegetable. It was our personal Vietnam, a war we fought bravely but could not win, and I’ve carried around this vague guilt that maybe that’s why he never grew into those huge feet.

It’s probably not true. I haven’t investigated to find out if that could be a factor. But now I find myself concerned for Wesley. I see the big picture of his future, and am frustrated that he won’t trust his parents and grandparents that we want good for him long term. He can’t seem to see that we have a plan for his good, All he sees is the immediate negative of broccoli. Oddly, there is a parallel in our relationship with God and we’ll see it in John 18:1-14.

JESUS HAD CONTROL

Jesus’ long session with his disciples the last night of his life was now over. He moved with them east across the Kidron Valley to a hill called the Mount of Olives. It was called that because there were olive trees on it. There was a quiet spot John calls a garden. Jesus’ other biographers identified it as a place called Gethsemane, which meant “oil press.” Jesus often took his men to this quiet place to pray and rest.

If you go to Jerusalem you can sort of visit the spot. I say sort of because there are competing claims about its exact location. The Roman Catholics, the Greek Orthodox and the Russian Orthodox all have declared different sites for the Garden, and there is yet another candidate some others have suggested. A scholar named William McClure Thomson who studied the area wrote a book back in 1880 in which he concluded that all 4 of the suggested sites are wrong and that the actual site was several hundred yards to the east. In other words, we know the general vicinity of the garden, but we cannot be confident of its exact location. We don’t really need to know. You are not going to be any more holy, powerful or spiritual by visiting the exact spot where Jesus prayed the night before he was arrested. What is important is what happened there that night and the following day.

The leadership of Israel perceived Jesus to be a threat. In part they viewed him through the lens of their own thinking. Both Israel’s religious leaders and the Roman leadership in Jerusalem made that mistake. Jesus had been making the religious leaders look bad and as time went on that got worse. When he started warning the people about what he called the “leaven of the Pharisees,” calling them hypocrites and white washed tombs, they concluded he had to go. They claimed that they were concerned that Jesus was going to start an uprising against Rome and create a conflict that would end with the destruction of their nation. Jesus had no intention of doing anything like that. He was not about political power, but they were so steeped in their own way of thinking that they couldn’t hear him. But the real rub for the leaders of Israel was if something wasn’t done about Jesus, he was going to undercut their image and their base of power in Judea. People were going to lose respect for the religious leadership. They’d lose their position, which afforded them both great respect and money. They concluded they had to silence him by terminating him with extreme prejudice.

This desire to get rid of Jesus presented them with a couple of problems. The first was that they were not allowed by the Romans to execute people. Only the Romans could do that. Unfortunately for the Jewish religious leaders, they had no grounds to ask for capital punishment under Roman law. Their biggest issue was that Jesus was calling himself equal with God and claiming to be the Messiah. The Romans could not have been less interested in such claims. Imagine Christians taking an argument to court over whether the rapture will occur before the great tribulation or after. The court would throw it out because they have no interest in adjudicating such things. That’s what the Romans would do with fine matters of Jewish doctrine. So the Jewish leaders had to find something they could accuse Jesus of that the Romans would care about.

That was the first problem. The second was they wanted to arrest Jesus and have a trial that would produce some charges the Romans would care about. But how could the arrest such a visible and popular person? They had tried to do that before unsuccessfully. They needed to find a time and place where they could arrest him without causing a riot, so it needed to be somewhere quiet with few people around, preferably at night. But they didn’t have cameras posted around the city that allowed them to watch where he was going. They didn’t have tracking devices they could plant on him so they could follow his movements. They needed someone close to Jesus that would tip them off when the time and place were right. That someone fell right into their laps. Judas came to them and offered to lead them right to Jesus. He figured Jesus would go to the Mount of Olives that night as he often did. So he led the forces of the religious leaders right to Jesus.

Verse 3 says the group that came out to arrest Jesus was a detachment of soldiers plus some Jewish officials. The term translated “detachment of soldiers” was the term for a cohort of Roman soldiers, which numbered 1000 soldiers. In verse 12 John mentions the detachment and their commander. The word for commander was chiliarch, a term used for an officer who would be over a full cohort of 1000. However, scholars agree it likely was not the full cohort. They were accompanied by Jewish temple police and officials. So it is certain that this group involved several hundred men. The other Gospel writers referred to it as a “large crowd.”

This huge group came armed with weapons, identified elsewhere as swords and clubs, which were, if you’ll excuse the expression, cutting edge in terms of the weapons technology of the day. They brought hundreds of armed men to arrest one guy, which tells you they were expecting trouble. So they came with what they hoped would be overwhelming force. What we see here is Jesus confronted by the naked power of the world. This appeared to be a big mismatch. What chance did Jesus have against such a show of force? What was he going to do, send his little band of fishermen to fight off hundreds of armed men?

We need to remember who Jesus is. John told us in the opening words of this book that everything that exists was made by Jesus. The universe is massive beyond our imagination. There are hundreds of billions of stars out there stretching into unimaginably vast distances. Some of those stars are astounding. Our sun is huge. It is so big 1.3 million earths could fit inside it. But the sun is merely an average, ordinary star. There is a star near the center of our galaxy that astronomers call UY Scuti that is 1,700 times larger than our sun. That means you could fit 2 billion earths inside it. I can’t even begin to comprehend how enormous that is. Maybe you saw the article this week that reported some astronomers from Australia have discovered something even more amazing. It is a quasar that has mass 17 billion times that of the sun. It is, they reported, 500 trillion times brighter than our sun. We have no way to comprehend something like that. Jesus made those stupendous objects. He has power that is so massive and profound we can’t even come up with words to describe it. How threatened do you suppose he was by this big show of force from the authorities?

Notice what verse 4 says, “Knowing what was going to happen.” None of this was a surprise to Jesus. For some time he had been telling his followers that this was coming. He knew all about this big force coming to arrest him. What could he do about it? If he didn’t want to be arrested all he had to do was leave town. He was there in that olive grove because this was part of his plan.

What happened next would be downright funny if it weren’t for the ominous events that followed. When the arresting force arrived Jesus asked, “Who is it you want?” He already knew, but he was about to make a point. They said “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said, “That’s me.” Then notice what happened according to the end of verse 6. “They drew back and fell to the ground.” This has a sort of slapstick kind of feel to it. Hundreds of armed men fell backwards like a bunch of bowling pins being knocked down when Jesus said this. Some people claim this was because they were surprised or because they were somehow so impressed by Jesus. That’s not what happened. This was totally involuntary. They didn’t trip. They weren’t surprised. They were knocked down by the power of God.

That had to have looked pretty funny when that many men were knocked down. None of them had any idea what had just hit them. They’d just turned into human dominoes being knocked over. I’m sure they all were disconcerted, embarrassed and were asking, “What just happened?” They had no explanation. Jesus was making a point. They come out wielding their little swords and clubs to threaten the Almighty, the Creator of an infinitely vast and powerful universe. What a joke. In the original *Star Wars* movie there’s a scene where Obi Wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker are stopped by Imperial Troopers looking for their droids. Obi Wan uses the force and says, “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for. Move along.” The trooper says, “These aren’t the droids we’re looking for. Move along.”

Well that was just a movie. This was real life. Jesus just showed everyone there in that olive grove that he had something way better than a fictional force. It was much more powerful than clubs and swords. He had the power to simply knock those guys flat with a flick of his finger if he so chose. If Jesus didn’t want to be arrested, he was not going to be arrested and there wasn’t a single thing those people could have down about it. Jesus let them arrest him not because he had to, but because he chose to as part of his plan to rescue the human race.

This funny incident reminds us who is in control. It’s not the great powers of the world. It’s not rich people or people with lots of influence. Oh, they think they have power and control, and at times they certainly seem to. It’s not people with seemingly overwhelming numbers, weapons and power. Jesus is the one in control. Psalm 2:1-4 says, “Why do the nations conspire and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.’ The one enthroned in heaven laughs, the Lord scoffs at them.” In this case he knocked them flat without a word or a gesture, just to let them know who has the power. In verses 10-11 David wrote, “Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling.” Daniel 2:21 says of God, “He changes the times and the seasons. He deposes kings and raises up others.” Psalm 22:28 says, “Dominion belongs to the Lord. He rules over the nations.”

Writer Philip Yancey said he was in chess club when he was in high school. He said at the lunch hour he “could be found sitting at a table with other nerds poring over books” about chess. He studied techniques and strategies and became so good at the game that he won most of his matches. Then he put the game aside for 20 years. After that he met a chess master and played a few matches with him. He said, “Any classic offense I tried, he countered with a classic defense. If I turned to more risky, unorthodox techniques,” he countered and used Yancey’s own moves to defeat him. Yancey said he had complete freedom to do what he wanted, but his opponent’s “superior skill guaranteed that my purposes inevitably ended up serving his own.” He concluded God works kind of like that. We have “freedom to rebel…but even as we do so we end up ironically serving his eventual goal.” He says this transforms how he views both good things and bad things that happen. All of it is somehow going to serve God’s purpose.

JESUS DID NOT USE THE WORLD’S POWER

We know how things work in this world. We have a saying, “Fight fire with fire.” The authorities came after Jesus with a show of force. How do people typically respond in a situation like that? If they have the ability they fight fire with fire. They respond to numbers and force with their own numbers and force.

There are certain words that all parents are more familiar with than they would like to be. One of the classic refrains parents often hear is, “That’s not fair.” We all know the correct response to that refrain, which is, say it with me, “Life’s not fair.” Another expression we all heard too often is, “Well he started it.” What has happened when the kids trot that one out? Likely child A pushed child B, where upon child B responded by pushing child A back. This provokes child A to push even harder, and the battle is joined. The parent gets involved when it is on the verge of becoming a brawl. As is always the case in football, the person who gets flagged is usually the one who retaliates, which leads to the “He started it” protest. The natural human inclination is if you push me, I push you back. If you attack me with swords and clubs, I fight back with swords and clubs.

Peter, one of Jesus’ closest friends, did exactly what our natural reactions tell us to do. He pulled out a sword and went after one of the people who was threatening his friend, Jesus. He managed to cut off the ear of one of the men, a guy named Malchus. My guess is he didn’t slice it clean off, but he did serious damage to his ear. I also suspect Peter wasn’t aiming at his ear. This was a kind of characteristic response from Peter. He had a tendency to shoot first and think about the consequences later, if at all. In this case, discretion would have been the better part of valor. Faced with a force of hundreds of armed men, attacking with his sword was not the wisest course of action. It certainly was not what Jesus wanted.

Jesus wasn’t as concerned about the wisdom of Peter’s tactics as he was about the lack of godliness in Peter’s action. Jesus told Peter to put his sword away, and by implication told the rest of his followers to stand down. In his account of these events Luke revealed some detail. In Luke 22:49 he tells us, “When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike them with our swords?’” Peter didn’t wait for an answer, but launched his pre-emptive strike. In verse 51 Luke tells us Jesus said, “No more of that.” Then he actually healed the ear of the wounded man.

Matthew revealed some detail that neither John nor Luke noted. Jesus said a couple of things that are hugely noteworthy. According to Matthew 26:52 after telling Peter to put his sword away Jesus said, “For all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” If you want to fight fire with fire, you’re going to die by fire. That’s a lesson that all humans need to learn but few do. Then Jesus said according to verse 53, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than 12 legions of angels?” We’ve heard of the Roman legions. A legion was the largest unit in the Roman army. In the first century it numbered about 5,500 soldiers. That means 12 legions of angels would be some 66,000 angels. I’m pretty sure that 66,000 angels could have handled the few hundred soldiers that showed up to arrest Jesus. Talk about a mismatch. That would have been a slaughter. Jesus could have gone that route, but as he pointed out in verse 54 then he could not have fulfilled Scripture and carried out the plan to rescue humanity.

Instead of fighting fire with fire, Jesus fought it with love and faith. He refused to fight back. He knew this was all part of the plan that would involve his sacrifice to rescue the human race, so he refused to use the power of the world. He simply let the authorities arrest him and take him to trial, and he even healed one of his enemies. That’s because it was the only way he could love the human race, including the people who had come to arrest him and those who sent them.

IMPLICATIONS

JESUS WANTS US USE LEFT HANDED POWER

Our culture tells us there are no absolute truths, no absolute right or wrong, so everything is subjective and relative. It is common to hear people say we just need to do the right thing. However, if our culture is correct, there is no right thing. We literally can do no wrong because there is no such thing as wrong according to our culture. Our culture also says this world, this life, is all there is, so what happens in life right now is all that matters because there is nothing else. Finally our culture does not believe God is real. In the end, there are only 2 alternatives for what the center of life is. When you boil it all down, it is either about self or it is about God. But if God is not real, it can only be about self.We end up with self is the center of everything, all we have is this life right now, and there are no absolute truths, no absolute rights or wrongs. If all that is true, there is only one thing that matters. That one thing is power. The only thing that makes sense in that worldview is making sure in this life, the only one we have, we get what we want. Right or wrong doesn’t matter because it doesn’t exist. The only way that we can make sure we get what we want is if we have the power to get it. This is what we hear so much about power for various groups, because in this formulation power is all that matters. You must have power to force other people or circumstances to give you what you think you need and want.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, “All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power, not truth.” That is what our culture thinks. Everything is subjective. The position with the power prevails not because it is true, but because it has power to do so. It should give people pause when they reflect on the fact that Nietzsche’s ideas laid the philosophical groundwork for the horror that was the Nazi regime in Germany.

That kind of power is straight, direct power. It is the ability to force others or circumstances to yield to your will and desires. In ancient times power was represented as the right hand. Martin Luther called the power to force others to submit to your will right handed power. When the authorities in ancient Judea sent hundreds of armed men to arrest Jesus, they were using right handed power.

In his book, *The Parables Of The Kingdom*, theologian Robert Capon said that this right handed power is “Use the force you need to get the result you want. It has many uses. With it you lift the spaghetti from the plate to your mouth, wipe the spaghetti sauce off your pants, carry the pants to the dry cleaner…(It is) responsible for almost everything that happens in the world. The beauty of it is, it works. From removing dust with a cloth to removing your enemy with a gun, it achieves its end in sensible, effective…ways.” But he goes on to say it has one whopping limitation. It is useless for having loving relationships. In fact, it typically destroys relationships.

Left handed power is doing what Jesus did. It is choosing to love rather than exercise power. It is a paradoxical kind of power, because it looks for all the world like weakness. It looks like losing, just like it looked like Jesus lost. It is making yourself vulnerable, giving yourself up. Left handed power is giving and serving rather than demanding and controlling. Romans 12:14 says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Romans 12:21 says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Those verses are telling us to use left handed power. 1 Peter 3:9 says, “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called.” That’s using left handed power. In Matthew 5:43-44 Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Jesus taught left handed power, and he exemplified it in his life.

When we threaten, raise our voices, try to intimidate, respond with anger, mirror whatever others are doing to us, obviously when we use physical force, we are using that straight line power that the world loves. It is natural to us to the point where it is almost a knee jerk reaction that we use without even thinking. Jesus had all the right handed power he needed to defeat his enemies that night. But instead, he gave himself up, because that’s what it took to love us.

There was an occasion years ago when we bought an appliance from a local store. We were happy because we got a really good deal on it. They gave us a date when they would deliver and install it, as well as the obligatory 3 hour window they would come that day. The 3 hour window came and went, and they never came nor did we hear anything from them. I called to ask what was going on. They were very apologetic and rescheduled. Again the scheduled time came and went with no sign of them and no communication. I called again and let them know I was very frustrated, and they again rescheduled. The third time the exact same thing happened. Now I was really peeved. I let them know that. They assured me it wouldn’t happen again. It didn’t. On the 4th try they actually showed up, brought the appliance into our house, then they announced that the unit was damaged and they could not install it. This was the last one they had. They said I’d have to talk to the people at the store. Instead of wading through repeated menu choices and messages that my call was important to them, I decided to go to the store and talk to them in person. I went to the customer service desk and explained to the employee what they had done. I expected they would at least offer to do something to make this right. The employee I talked to said he thought the store certainly needed to do something for us to make this right because what they had done was terrible. But he said he didn’t have the authority to do anything so he’d get the manager. The manager came, I explained the whole sad tale again, and he apologized, then said, “You can just buy a different model.” I said, “Don’t you think you should do something to at least make this better?” He said, “There’s nothing I can do.” I pointed to the sign behind the desk and said, “Do know what that sign says?” It said, “Customer Service.” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Is that what you call this?” He repeated, “I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do.”

Unfortunately, I had no leverage. They hadn’t broken any laws. They had just failed to give even rudimentary service. There was nothing I could do. So I told him, “Well, I’m going to let everyone I know how you have treated us. And I plan to write a review explaining what a joke your definition of customer service is. And I will most certainly take my business elsewhere.” He didn’t say it, but I got the sense that he was thinking, “Oooh, I’m so scared.” I went away from that interaction really irked. I won’t tell you what store it was, but I will say that definitely was not the Best Buy we ever made. But as I was driving away Irealized what I had just done. They certainly had failed as a business, but I had responded by trying to use power. The only power I had was to threaten to spread a bad report about them and to shop somewhere else. It was an attempt to force him to give me what I wanted. I was trying to use right handed power, and I did it without even thinking. It just came naturally.

The Jesus way is radical and very different. But think for a moment what would have happened if Jesus had fought fire with fire and used right handed power. He had the power so he would have won. But he would not have accomplished the Father’s will, he would not have changed the world, and he would not have rescued us and changed our lives. In appearing to lose, he chose to love and won the biggest victory in history. We are called according to Peter and Paul to follow his example. We need to remember that while it makes us vulnerable, it may cost us and it looks a lot like weakness and losing, left handed power is the most powerful force in existence. **It is the only thing that can change hearts**.

JESUS WANTS US TO TRUST HIS CONTROL

Choosing not to wield right handed power definitely made Jesus vulnerable and it cost him terribly. It put him on a cross. He knew that was going to happen. How could he have made that choice? What enabled him to do such a sacrificial thing? He knew the Father had a plan. He wanted that plan more than he wanted his own comfort and safety. He trusted in the Father’s plan and rejoiced in it. He chose it over his own immediate “good.” What John didn’t tell us was what happened in that olive grove before the arrest. Jesus spent time praying. He prayed, “Father, if it is your will, let this cup pass from me.” Please, Father, is there any way around this? He prayed that because he knew how horrifying it was going to be. But then he concluded his prayer by saying, “Not my will, but yours be done, Father.”

We think we control what happens in life, but if you think about it a little you will realize we have much less control than we think. The Super Bowl this year was an exciting, close game that was decided on the last play. People talk like the outcome was totally decided by decisions made by coaches, by the excellent play of Pat Mahomes and other human factors. However, the entire outcome of the game hinged on a fluke. In the second half when San Francisco had mostly controlled the game and was in the lead they forced Kansas City to punt. The 49er returner saw the punt was short and had to let it bounce. But one of his teammates was intent on blocking an opponent and didn’t see where the ball was. The ball barely hit him on the back of the heel of his foot. That made it a live ball. The returner tried to pick it up off the ground but couldn’t get it. A Kansas City player fell on the ball. They suddenly had the ball deep in San Francisco territory and quickly moved the ball into the endzone giving them the lead for the first time. The game’s outcome really hinged on that ball accidentally grazing the heel of a player. No coach controlled that and no player could have anticipated it.

Jesus’ actions that night in that olive grove confront us with two critically important questions. First, do we believe that God really is sovereign and has a plan that is at work in our lives today? Sometimes we might be tempted to think that God had a plan back then, but that he is not at work in our lives today. We think and act as though everything is up to us. The second question is, given the premise that God is at work and does have a plan, are we willing to choose his plan rather than pursue our own will and plans? Jesus did choose the Father’s plan and it resulted in unfathomable pain and loss for him personally. It’s hard for us to understand why God might have a plan for us that would also involve disappointment, pain or loss as his plan did for Jesus. It’s even harder to choose to trust that plan when it does bring with it unpleasant or painful circumstances.

J.R.R. Tolkien said, “No man can estimate what is really happening at the present. All we do know…is that evil labors with vast power and perpetual success in vain, preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in.” We see the evil at work, but he’s right, all it is doing is preparing for God’s good plan to work. The only question is, will we be willing to trust that plan no matter what?

My junior year in high school I was a scrub on the baseball team. The coach had zero confidence in me. I don’t even know why he kept me on the team because he never played me. I recall one game early in the season when he gave me a rare start. My second time to bat I came up with a couple of men on base. This was my chance to prove I could play if I could only get a hit. Then the coach gave me the sign to bunt. He wanted me to sacrifice. I wanted no part of that. I would never be able to show him I could hit if the only chance I had in a crucial situation he told me to bunt. It was a galling moment. The coach had a plan, one he thought was good for the team, but it wasn’t good for me. It took away a precious chance. I toyed with the idea of claiming I didn’t get the signal and just swinging away, hoping for something good to happen. But in the end, I did what he wanted, mostly because I knew if I disobeyed him and failed to get a hit I’d be bench bait for the rest of my life. God has the plan. His plan is good. His plan for Jesus was incredibly painful, but it was the best thing that has ever happened to the human race. So we need to trust his plan at all times. That’s what frees us to take the risk of only using left handed power.