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Potomac Fever and the Good News

As the Presidential inauguration approaches, we are reminded of a trip we made to Washington D.C. two years ago. We had the privilege then of traveling to our nation's capital to attend the "swearing in" to office of our good friend who is a U.S. Congressman from Minnesota. The sights and sounds of the capital city dazzle even the most sophisticated among us. So alluring is Washington D.C., they say, that senators, congressmen, lobbyists, and all the others who live and work in this center of world power, are likely to come down with what is known as "Potomac Fever." Potomac Fever is the condition experienced by those who are seduced by power and ultimately become so drunk on it that their judgment, and even their ethics, may be altered in the face of it.

Of course, the potentially corrupting influence of power is not a modern phenomenon. Those of us who treasure the ancient stories of our faith need only open the pages of our scripture texts to find example after example of power's misuse. Pharaoh enslaved a people. Jezebel slaughtered her enemies. David had Bathsheba's husband put in the line of fire to rid himself of his rival. And Pontius Pilate condemned an innocent Jesus to crucifixion. And so it goes. What can change this pattern?

As a new administration takes office, and all our elected officials in Washington D.C. embark on a new opportunity to govern together, we find ourselves praying that Potomac fever will not infect our leaders. They have enormous means at their disposal for good or for ill – and a mighty task ahead, to set our economy back on its feet. Will they be successful in wielding their power appropriately, wisely, and justly on behalf of the citizenry?

We wonder how well we would handle the reins of political power, if they were to be found in our hands. How would you manage such enormous responsibility? Perhaps none of us can be sure until we are faced by the potential and the temptation of such power. But we hope that the values that undergird our lives today would be compelling enough to prevent the onset of Potomac Fever.

It is true that across history, those who have lived by the Good News of faith have not, as a result, been inevitably less violent, less corruptible, or less unjust in use of power than others. But at least, we would contend, they have been less cavalier in condoning such behavior in obtaining their goals.

What power do you hold in life? Perhaps it is not political. But you do hold power in relationships, through the use of resources at your disposal, by virtue of your political voice and your vote at the polls. We all hold such power. How do you use it? How do you evaluate your success at managing it?

It's always helpful to stop to assess our own use of power. Let us use it wisely, carefully, and well, friends!