

The key that unlocks the kingdom: Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-31

by [Tom McGrath](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

In the South Side Chicago neighborhood where I grew up, if one of the men on the block found himself stymied by City Hall bureaucracy, he would talk to Louie. I was never quite sure what Louie did for a living. Unlike the other men in the neighborhood, he drove off each day in a sleek Lincoln Continental, wore fancy clothes, sported a diamond pinky ring and always smelled of expensive (or at least obvious) aftershave. But whether your problem was getting a pothole repaired, acquiring a building permit or getting your wayward nephew a job on a “Streets & San” crew, you could call on Louie, who would inevitably respond, “Don’t worry. I got a guy.” Louie would “drop a dime.” He’d “reach out.” He would contact his “guy” in the right office who could somehow make things happen.

Not everybody could make that call and get action. “We don’t want nobody nobody sent” is a phrase and a principle that Chicago politicians live by. You can fault this maxim for its poor grammar, but in the economy of city hall power-brokering, you can’t fault its logic. It’s all about connections. In the city of Chicago getting someone to answer your call takes clout. In the kingdom of heaven, however, what works is faith.

Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” As Jesus sees it, some folks, even folks known for being religious, haven’t cultivated the right connections. They trust in their own radical adherence to the letter of the law instead of radical surrender to the mercy of God. Jesus invited everyone (and he meant everyone, not just those who are “like us”) to hear his words and act on them.

I suppose it’s not surprising that so many American Christians seem to model their understanding of the kingdom of heaven on how things get done in city hall, the corporate boardroom, the dean’s office or the union hall. It’s the system we live by. At times it works to great advantage, but far too often it goes awry.

And then the influence game becomes violent. We see ample evidence of such violence and domination by those who are “connected” in much of our world—by

Afghan warlords as well as the tyrannical chair of the condo board. It's the way of the egomaniacal dictator as well as the newly promoted, insecure foreman. Those who are poor comprehend that game, being so often on the losing end of its rigged rules. Perhaps that's why it was the poor who were so open to the new deal that Jesus offered.

Jesus was no stranger to the power structure of clout and political connections. In the end it was this power structure that condemned him, tortured him and hung him on a cross. They had grilled him throughout his years of public ministry, wondering where he was from and who he was connected to. The religious and political authorities of Jesus' day didn't want nobody nobody sent.

But Jesus was sent by someone. He did have a connection. He was tuned into another power structure, one founded on faith, which is not "power over" others, but "power for" others. His connection flowed in and through and from the very heart of God. The kind of influence that Jesus wielded was not based on implied threats or favors with strings attached; it was grounded in grace freely given—grace not earned by actions grown empty and devoid of meaning. Whereas Louie jealously guarded his connections, Jesus proclaimed his far and wide, urging everyone he met to share what he had come to know. In Louie's world, connections are hard-earned and easily lost; in the reign of God, power flows from a connection that is freely offered and must be freely received. Faith is grounded in a relationship, an encounter with the living God, who is the source of true and lasting power in this life.

St. Paul was fascinated with power. That's probably because, try as he might, early in his life his own power just wasn't enough. He came to believe that we can and must rely solely on the power of God, which is revealed to us "through faith for faith." Faith in God may not count for much in the world of back-room politics, but faith is your only way into the realm of salvation. In the reign of God, faith is not a bland acquiescence to a set of principles; faith is the key that unlocks the kingdom, and it is the kingdom itself.

Those who heard Jesus speak were amazed that he spoke "as one having authority," and not like the religious teachers they'd been used to hearing. And this proved Jesus' point. The authority he enjoyed flowed from his own experience of being grounded in God. The scribes built their life's foundation on how meticulously they carried out the law. Both Jesus and Paul knew that this was sandy ground at best.