

## **The Power of the Holy Spirit**

Sometimes the strangest things happen when we least expect it. That happened as I was presiding at the wedding of a dear couple, both widowers. The wedding started off well enough in a magnificent church with candles and flowers galore on a bright, sunny June day. The church organ was one of the finest in the state, and the sound from that instrument was glorious. But just as the couple was completing their vows, there was a power outage. No lights. No air conditioning. No sound system. No organ.

We got through the rest of the ceremony. I blessed the couple, and they walked out of the church as husband and wife, but there was no organ music in the background. The wedding still happened. The couple was legally married. However, without power, the wedding wasn't quite as planned.

Many people are going through life the best they can without power. They are alive and functioning, but not as alive and functioning as they should be. They might even say, "I'm doing fine. Leave me alone. Life was meant to be like this." If they have never been turned on to power, they don't know any better and may even feel satisfied.

"Where's the power in the church?" I keep asking myself that question as I notice churches struggling with declining membership and dwindling finances. Of course, there are some vibrant churches, but there are even more that are not doing well. No doubt the clergy and lay leadership are doing their best. There is worship, preaching, pastoring and administration, but the churches don't seem to be alive, vibrant communities. There is more reserve than enthusiasm, more caution than risk-taking, more looking to the past than the future. So, I keep asking, "Where's the power?"

In today's lesson from Acts, the risen Christ has been with the apostles for forty days. The apostles had many conversations with Jesus, eaten meals together and enjoyed fellowship. No doubt they had hoped Jesus would stay with them forever, that he would vindicate Israel, destroy their enemies and show the world that even death could be conquered. They had hoped for a triumphant, victorious Christ to herald God's reign upon the world.

Jesus had other ideas. It was not for him to proclaim the good news to the world but for them. They would continue the mission when he was gone. They would be his hands and feet, his mouth and eyes and ears to a world desperately in need of good news.

So, on the day of his ascension into heaven, just before he leaves them, Jesus says to his disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Notice the order: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus wanted them to spread the message in Jerusalem. Seems simple enough, doesn't it? Until you realize that Jerusalem was where Jesus had been crucified. The local authorities there were all searching for his followers. At best, they could expect persecution. At worst, death.

Judea was the larger region surrounding Jerusalem. Even here the apostles would be facing some barriers. All of them were from Galilee. Galileans were considered religiously impure, tainted by Gentile influence. Judeans made fun of the Galilean accent, in the same way that snobby Northerners might make fun of a distinctly Southern accent. The risk was that the apostles would not be taken seriously.

The command to take the message to Samaria was even more shocking. Jews who had intermarried with pagans settled in Samaria. They did not practice the orthodox Jewish faith. Samaritans were considered "half breeds." Jews and Samaritans hated each other. So why would Jesus tell his disciples to share the good news with Samaritans? This is like being sent into enemy territory.

And finally, Jesus' followers were to take the good news to the ends of the earth. What did that mean? Would they even be expected to share the good news with Gentiles? This was beyond their imagination. They couldn't yet wrap their minds around the enormity of the task. "Do you really mean that, Jesus? Arabs, Jews, Africans, Asians? Even the barbarians living in Germany and the British Isles? Everybody?" Yes, everybody. It was a tall order. It seemed like an impossible assignment. And so, before Jesus returns to the Father, he redefines what is possible.

Hudson Taylor was one of the most influential missionaries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He brought the Gospel to China and established many thriving churches there before the Communist takeover. Taylor used to say that there are three phases in great tasks undertaken for God: impossible, difficult, and done.

So, how did these apostles – none of them educated or sophisticated or from wealthy families – spread the Gospel and change the world? The answer is the power of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Spirit is unlike any other power. It is not human power or ingenuity. It is not being clever, or manipulative or aggressive. Rather, it is transforming, liberating, life changing, and saving power that transforms lives and changes the course of history.

"But you will receive power" Jesus says to his disciples. This is the power to witness God's love, mercy, and forgiveness to all people. The power to make disciples, baptize them, teach them, and help them live as followers of Jesus. The power to forgive sins, heal hurts, and make whole broken and battered lives.

This is the power in the church today. The problem is that many of us don't believe it. We think the power is past, even though it is within us.

There is a famous story about Yates Pool. During the Great Depression, a man named Yates owned a sheep ranch. Unfortunately, he did not have enough money to continue to pay the

mortgage. It looked like he might lose the ranch. Like many other people at the time, he was forced to live on a government subsidy. Each day as he tended his sheep he worried how he was going to pay his bills.

Sometime later a seismographic crew appeared and suggested that there might be oil on his land. He gave them permission to drill after a lease contract was signed. At 1,115 feet, the men struck a huge oil reserve. Subsequent wells that was dug revealed even larger quantities of oil. Mr. Yates owned it all. The day he bought the land he also received the oil and mineral rights. He had been living with the help of government assistance. He was a multimillionaire living in poverty. Even though he owned all that oil with its tremendous potential, he didn't realize he owned it.

How often do we live as if we are spiritually poor, unaware of the extraordinary power at our disposal? The fact is that the Holy Spirit dwells in every baptized Christian. You may never have felt the power. You may never have expressed this power. But the mighty power of the Holy Spirit is in you – and if you would only release it, that power would change your life in ways you can hardly now imagine.

I know... it is hard to believe that the power of the Spirit has been given to you and me. Still, the promise of Jesus is not just to his disciples, but to us. You and I have received the Holy Spirit at baptism, and so the power of God is in us. Power to share God's love with other people. Power to overcome failure. Power to vanquish sin. Power to proclaim the good news boldly in an unreceptive world. Power to help others know Christ. Power to do the impossible.

Years ago, when I was a priest in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, I was asked to visit a resident in a nursing home who was very elderly and almost completely deaf. She had Parkinson's disease and ongoing dementia. She also could not see very well, and most times when I visited her, she was in bed or on a chair secured by straps so she would not fall.

I would visit this lady monthly and try hard to make small talk with her, but her condition simply prevented any sustained conversation. When I came into her room, I would sit by her side, smile, and say a few words, and then pray with her, give her communion, hold her hand, and bless her. I would then leave, feeling very inadequate, very incompetent at my inability to minister effectively to this woman.

About a year after visiting this woman, she died. I was asked to conduct the funeral at the nursing home. Before the funeral began, her two daughters came up to me and handed me a piece of paper. On it were these words: "Please tell the young priest how much his visits mean to me."

Anytime I am tempted to feel incompetent or inadequate as a priest, I remember that note. It wasn't me who gave that woman comfort – it was Christ through the Spirit in me. What I could not do on my own strength and abilities, God was doing through me.

That's the Spirit to every believer in Jesus – the power to rise above our weaknesses, to face the challenges, to comfort the hurting, and for us to accomplish the work we are called to do. We may think we can't do it, but with Jesus and the Spirit, we can. The Holy Spirit came to the apostles to empower them to continue the work Jesus had begun, the same work Jesus calls us to do today.

I suspect that everyone in this church has their burdens and problems. We all face challenges in life, great and small, but this, I know: You have the power. Jesus has ascended to the Father, and he has sent the Holy Spirit to empower us to do the work of ministry. Nothing is impossible in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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Text – Acts 1:1-11

Sunday after the Ascension, C

Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ