

You Shall Receive Power

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Acts 1:6-8; 2:1-21

I once read that there is no better proof that Jesus was who he said he was than the before-and-after pictures of his disciples. Before Pentecost, they were dense, timid bumbler, who fled and deserted Jesus at the first sign of trouble. In the Gospel of Mark, they never really understand a single thing Jesus says or does. They seem to have the awareness of broccoli, and that is an insult to broccoli. Not exactly the sharpest tools in the shed. Mark is downright brutal in his treatment of the disciples – the twelve losers. They just never get Jesus.

But after Pentecost, there is a dramatic change. They become fearless leaders. They heal the sick and cast out demons. They confront hostile authorities, go to jail gladly where they sing hymns and make converts. They face the threat of death without blinking. Under their leadership, the church spreads throughout the known world. What happened? Why the transformation?

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.” This was the risen Christ’s promise to his disciples in Acts 1, and they did not have to wait long for this promise to be fulfilled. On the day of Pentecost, a Jewish festival set fifty days after Passover, they were all together in one place when they received a crash course in the power of the Spirit...the rush of wind, tongues of fire, the sudden ability to speak strange languages. The disciples are transformed and a church is born. Indeed, they receive power. The Spirit, the very presence of Christ, now making a home in their hearts and doing a new thing in them and in the world. “You will receive power...”

What do you think of when you hear that word...power? Words we use in the life of the church are important. During our Church Listening Process, we have been working with folks from the North Bay Organizing Project. And the one thing community organizers keep telling us is that organizing all about claiming and using our power. But being good church folks, we aren’t sure how we feel about that. To speak of using power can often conjure up a lot of negative images: “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Our history is haunted by the tragic results of the misuse of power. I think of the three women recently freed from a decade of captivity in Cleveland. We keep hearing that this man had power over those three women. If that is power, then we don’t want it around here.

And yet, back to our text, we hear the risen Lord clearly speak about his disciples receiving power. What do you suppose he means? Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says that mostly the world believes that all assets are frozen, that things will pretty much stay the way they are. We talk about change, but essentially live our lives as if real change isn’t going to happen. You know: if you are dead, you are dead and will stay that way. If you are alive, then you have no choice but to scramble and get all you can get because that’s all there is and will ever be. If you are homeless, you will stay homeless. If you are number one, then you will manipulate the system in order to remain number one. Everything is fixed and arranged and settled and closed. What is the role of power in such a fixed world? Power is used to keep the boundaries secure, to make sure no one crosses the established lines, to keep things the way they are and keep all assets frozen in place. Look at Congress. It has become the place where those with power and influence and money use their assets to make sure nothing changes. Who cares what the voters think? But is this the kind of power, the use of power, that Jesus is talking about?

Brueggemann contends that both Christians and Jews have long sung a different song, have told an alternative story, when it comes to power and the use of power. In his words, “The Bible asserts that God is a God of odd, dangerous, surging power in the earth, power which unsettles and revamps and opens and jeopardizes and heals. The God of the Bible is an inscrutable power for life released in the world. That power breaks down our categories of rich and poor, dead and alive, of insiders and outsiders, of the full and the hungry. There is a kind of dangerous restlessness here that lets nothing stay fixed and frozen, because God is on the move in more ways than we can understand. This divine restlessness shatters our complacency...makes life possible in our dead places, makes hope possible in our despair, and makes healing possible, even in the midst of our hurt and our hate and our fear.” The active and present spirit of Christ...even now fostering unity, not division; inspiring creativity, not repressing it; and re-visioning the future, not preserving the status quo. When that spirit is around, nothing remains fixed and frozen.

A story told by Rev. Rob Merola, a minister and a fly fisherman: “On the first day of my vacation, I went fly-fishing on the Yellowstone River in Montana and caught nothing but a couple of branches. That might have been because I didn’t have a clue as to what I was doing. I didn’t know what flies to use; I

didn't know how to work them in the water – when I should let them drift in the current and when I should retrieve them; I didn't know which areas of the river would be most productive in terms of holding actively feeding fish. Did I mention that it had been 20 years since I had last been fly fishing?

But the next day, all that changed when a good friend took me fishing. He had a boat, so we could cover a lot more water. He showed me what flies to use and how to present them. He showed me exactly where to cast. And guess what? I caught a number of very nice trout, some that were over 20 inches long and weighed several pounds.”

He concludes, “I could not have caught those fish without the help of my friend. I needed a boat, the proper flies and the necessary knowledge of how and where to fish this particular river. My friend had all these things, and in sharing them freely, he made it possible for me to do something I could not do on my own.”

I see that, not only as a great fishing story, but also as a great Pentecost story. We don't know what we can do, who knows what we will do, when the spirit gets a hold of us? We may even be enabled to do something we never thought we could do on our own. I think of Garrison Keillor's Powdermilk Biscuits. Remember how he describes them: “They give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done.” So it is that the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to get up and do what needs to be done, gives us the power to make human life possible in all the failed places. But are we ready for that?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: “When I was in Memphis a while back, I had a Sunday off so I went as far from the Episcopal Church as I could go. I went to Al Green's Full Gospel Tabernacle, where the service begins at eleven and ends around two. There was a huge choir, a three-piece band and a sound system turned all the way up...For three full hours we sang and clapped and raised our hands in the air. Children stood stomping their feet on the pews or crawled around underneath them while their mothers praised God and danced in place. All of the songs had pounding rhythms that built and built until people began to be slain by the spirit. One woman right in front of me bolted from her pew and ran around the perimeter of the church twice, while another one nearer the front did a jerking dance until she fell on the floor.

“I felt like I was caught in the middle of a thunderstorm, so I did what you are supposed to do in a thunderstorm. I made myself very small and held perfectly still. Lightening did not strike me, which was an answer to my prayer. But, in the months since, I have wondered about my reaction. Was it simply a reaction to that kind of worship or was it more than that? If I had been in that room with the disciples on the first Pentecost day, would I have done the same thing? ‘Oh God, if you are about to pour out your Spirit and this is what it looks like, would you please skip me?’”

When the wind and fire of the Spirit start coming down, do we welcome them or do we reach for an umbrella? Do we want to be stretched that far...transformed that completely, suddenly doing things we never thought we could do? Or do we prefer the old crippling identities, the old quarrels and resistances, the old anxiety and despair, the old patterns war and hate and greed. We may not like them, but at least they are familiar. Or dare we embrace Pentecost, dare we embrace a powerful unimaginable alternative? As Alan Jones, of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco once said, “Only a fool would pray for the Holy Spirit, only fools for Christ do.”

Do you recall Thomas Hardy's character, Farmer Oak? He stood at the window and saw a young woman go by every morning and every evening to milk the cows. He just watched her come and go with the milk pails empty and full. He fell deeply in love with her, but she never knew. Because he was afraid, afraid to approach her, afraid to take a risk, afraid to say anything.

I suppose there is a bit of Farmer Oak in each of us. I suppose that more often than I would like to admit, I pray for Christ's spirit to come and restore predictability to my life, to remove me from risk, to give back the comfortable illusion of control that helps me sleep peacefully at night, to allow me to stand behind the window and just watch without getting involved. It is certainly no crime to pray for that gentle Spirit from time to time.

And yet, this day powerfully reminds us that there is another side to the Spirit – one that can set us on fire, transform our lives, overcome our fear and turn us and the world upside down. It is not predictable. It is risky. And it is way beyond our control. It invites us to fold up the umbrellas of our fears and uncertainties and put them away, that we might embrace the newness God is now working. No more frightened hearts, but hearts alive, clothed with power. Oh, make no mistake about it...all the old barriers are still there. It's just that the promise, the power, which is to say the very Spirit of Christ himself, is also still there, available for those who would trust it, who would dare to receive it and its power. Are you interested?