

"The Power of Pentecost"

Acts 2:1-21

June 4, 2017

The Day of Pentecost

We are in love with power. I'm not talking about political or military power (although we may be in love with power in those circumstances as well). I'm talking about power in terms of our machines, especially our "toys". When I was a child, men practically salivated as they talked about the power of their cars and how big the engines were in cubic inches. There was no talk about what mileage the car would get, but how fast that baby could go. Now, as excess gave way to frugality, our thirst for power has changed and become a bit nerdy. We salivate as we talk about the power we have in our computers and other digital devices. Storage capabilities went from megabytes to gigabytes to terabytes and who knows what 's next. Microprocessors got smaller, faster, and stronger.

Power is important for accomplishing big tasks, whether it is for our "toys" or other machines. But what is just as important as power is the fuel which enables us to access the power and go. A classic car with a huge engine but an empty gas tank isn't going anywhere. A computer with the fastest processor and a terabyte of terabytes hard drive will compute nothing without electricity. So we love the power and need the fuel in order to accomplish anything.

Power is an important part of our Pentecost celebration today. After Jesus rose from the dead but before He ascended into heaven, He left His followers with a rather big job. He said, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15). "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:20) That was a huge task for the apostles and the fledgling Church at the time. It remains a huge task for us and the 21st century church.

The question for this task is where is the power for such a big and difficult job? And, secondly, what is the fuel which will bring that power to bear as we proclaim the Gospel, make disciples, baptize, and teach?

Often, in our culture today, we are told to look within for power and strength to accomplish our goals. Many think that applies in this situation. Perhaps this whole miracle of Pentecost occurred because Peter drew upon some inner strength and took advantage of the power within him to do what he did. He just tried harder in his public-address skills and was successful because of that.

Or, we are told that we should look for power in the spectacular. Maybe what sealed the deal on that first Pentecost and caused that spectacular event to take place was those miraculous things that happened at the beginning of the story: the mighty wind coming down from heaven and the miraculous fire. Maybe those things inspired Peter to speak the way he did or inspired the crowds to receive his message the way they did.

We may think this way as we seek to fulfill God's plan twenty centuries later. Find power within. If we just improved our public speaking skills or memorized a witnessing outline or memorized more Bible verses or tried harder, then we would have the power to succeed that Peter had. Look for power in the spectacular. If we have something awesome like the wind and flames that the early church had – something to attract people's attention and hold their interest – then we could really get somewhere. I've heard some sad stories about churches who tried to do that. I heard of one pastor who rode a motorcycle into church. I heard of another pastor who put a bed on the stage of their church and laid on the bed to preach a sermon series on sex. Those could be even better than wind and flames.

But, as much as this may make sense in our culture these days, it is not the way of the Word of God, nor is it the way to access the power of Pentecost. Peter could not do what he did by finding power within and simply trying harder. First of all, he rarely put his thoughts together coherently but often spoke before he thought. Secondly, just 50 days before this, Peter had been a big coward by denying even knowing Jesus. And he had been one who did not initially believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. Now, this man is going to have the power to preach Jesus and faith in His death and

resurrection?! Not on his own! No way! What happened on that first Pentecost was not the result of Peter finding power from within and simply trying harder.

We are the same as Peter – sinners who have denied our Lord if, not in word, then surely in deed. Like Peter, we have no inner strength or power within to draw upon. Our hearts are sinful and corrupt and from it comes, not the plan of God, but the sinful selfish desires of the flesh. By ourselves, we cannot carry out the plan of God any more than Peter could.

What about the big wind and the flames? Didn't those things help? Didn't they get things going? There was no wind but only the "sound of a mighty rushing wind." And there was no fire per se but "divided tongues as of fire." They had no real power in them to do anything. These phenomena were only signs which show the way to the power but are not the power themselves.

It is the same for us. If we think that stunts that I mentioned before or others like them have any power to accomplish God's plan for the world, we are quite wrong. At best, these things can be signs that can direct us to the plan of God for forgiveness, life, and salvation accomplished by Jesus' perfect life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection from the dead. At worst, these gimmicks can lead people away from God and His gracious gifts for their lives and eternal destinies.

Peter was able to preach as he did and what he did by the true power – the power of the Holy Spirit. The sound of the mighty wind (spirit in the Greek) and the tongues of fire (baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire) would be the sign of the coming of the Holy Spirit. And, sure enough. Peter and the rest were filled with the Holy Spirit.

It was the power of the Holy Spirit, not any inner power or natural power, which enabled and empowered Peter and the others to speak the mighty wonders of God in the various languages of the people assembled there for the Jewish harvest festival of Pentecost. At first, this led to great confusion among the people. Some were perplexed. They had heard any number of rabbis and preachers before but nothing like this. Some were skeptical and thought the apostles had been tipping the new wine for the harvest festival a bit too much. All wondered, "What in the world was going on here?"

Ex-coward and ex-denier, Peter, stood and, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, explained. This was not a rowdy band of drunken Galilean fishermen. Nor was it some odd new sect of believers who got a little out of hand. What the people saw and what the people heard was the direct work of God as spoken of by the prophet Joel. In the last days, God would pour out His Holy Spirit on all flesh – sons and daughters; young men and old men; male servants and female servants. And with that coming of the Holy Spirit would come power. But the power would not come from the sound of wind, the appearance of flames, or even from self-designed gimmicks to attract attention. The power would come in the prophesying, that is speaking the Word of God on behalf of God.

You see, while the Holy Spirit is the power of God, the fuel that brings that power to bear on the lives of people is the Word of God. The first Pentecost shows this. When Peter got up, he didn't explain the events of the day in his own words or by trying to draw attention to him and the other eleven apostles. He simply spoke the Word of God from the prophet Joel which brought the power of the Holy Spirit to the hearts of the people.

Peter did not try to convert the people with flashy gimmicks or by performing miracles. He preached a sermon. If you come next week, you'll hear the bulk of that sermon in one of the readings. It's not a particular dynamic sermon, but Peter speaks the Word of God which fuels the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter speaks the Law of God which condemns the people for rejecting Jesus and crucifying Him. Peter speaks the Gospel of God which offers forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus' death and resurrection. The power of the Holy Spirit, fueled by His word spoken by this Galilean fisherman with all of his flaws, was demonstrated that day. Three thousand people were converted to faith in Jesus Christ. Now, THAT's power!

We may think that is some legendary occurrence of faith which is unique to Bible times and not available to common folks in Montana like us today. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Holy Spirit is alive and well with His power and indwelling in God's people today. He comes and fills us today. Perhaps He doesn't come with signs and wonders, but He comes nevertheless. How?

Peter explains to the people of his time and to us at the end of his sermon. He says, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

You, who have been baptized and called by the Lord, have received forgiveness for all of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now, there are not multiple Holy Spirits or different ways of being filled with the Holy Spirit. You are filled with the same Holy Spirit that filled the apostles on Pentecost. You are filled with the Holy Spirit to no less of a degree than Peter was. You need not worry or fear. The power of God dwells within each of you.

The fuel that brings the power of the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts and lives of people today – the Word of God – is yours as well. We don’t need to be nervous as the Lord calls us to be a part of His plan to reach the world with the Good News of His love, His forgiveness, and His promise of eternal life. We don’t need gimmicks or attention-getting devices or activities. Like Peter, who spoke in a hostile environment – much like ours today, we simply speak the Word of God, without fear or apology, to our family, our friends, our fellow citizens, and even our enemies. We speak the Law and tell about sin, much in the way a doctor speaks of illness, so that we may speak the Gospel and tell about the cure for sin and death in Jesus Christ.

The power of the Holy Spirit, fueled by the Word of God, will act. He will convert people to faith from unbelief. He will call people who have strayed away from Jesus back to Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He will do that within this congregation and locally through this congregation’s ministry. He will do this in our country and our world through missionaries and groups like the Gideons. Thousands upon thousands, millions upon millions, who have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God will be brought to faith and be saved.

Now, THAT is power – REAL power. That is the power of Pentecost. Amen.