

## "The Greatest Pentecost Miracle"

Acts 2:7-11

June 9, 2019

The Day of Pentecost

Last Thursday marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, the largest amphibious invasion in military history. A force numbering 156,115 troops from the United States, Great Britain, and Canada invaded Nazi-controlled France in 6,939 ships and landing vessels, 2,395 aircraft, and 867 gliders. The invasion took place on 5 beaches spanning 50 miles along the western coast of France with the fiercest fighting being at Omaha Beach. By June 11, all 5 beaches were secured. In an awesome display of power, these brave fighting forces probably saved the world and certainly began the end of World War II.

We like awesome displays of power in which obviously powerful evil foes are defeated by obviously superior forces of good. It's usually not difficult to identify the powerful evil forces or the superior forces of good in these conflicts. It's fairly obvious. In World War II, the powerful evil foe was Nazi Germany. The superior forces were in the Allies' weaponry and determination.

But is that always true? Is the evil enemy always obvious? Is the power for good always clear? On this day of Pentecost, when we celebrate Jesus keeping His promise to send power from on high, was this power really obvious? Was the opponent obvious as well? We might say that God uses seemingly weak power to defeat a hidden enemy.

This is seen in God's plan of salvation. People today think that we need to be saved from disease, hunger, global warming, and the like. Those and other problems seem to be the obvious enemies of humanity. However, the problem which salvation addresses – sin – seems to be ignored, unacknowledged, and even rejected by many people. Very few people in our world today acknowledge the existence of sin so it doesn't frighten them. Other people, including many Christians, may acknowledge the existence of sin but define it weakly as only inappropriate actions, poor choices, or mere character flaws which can be corrected with just a little bit of effort. Since sin is no big deal, many people think God can simply dismiss sin, ignore sin, overlook sin, or just let sin go.

However, sin is extremely strong and powerful. Its effects are very real and obvious even if its existence is denied. Sin is the only thing in all the universe that can separate us from God and the only thing which brings God's wrath upon us. Sin damns us to hell and an eternity of suffering. Should we want to free ourselves from sin, we soon find that sin enslaves us and controls us. Like with some strong addiction (to smoking, illegal drugs, or opioids), we are powerless to stop sinning. We may make some minor adjustments in our behavior and do what is right in certain areas for a short time. However, we can neither stop our sinful behavior nor rid ourselves of our sinful nature which has become part of us.

God's solution to this seemingly weak and often ignored problem of sin is to use "weak/power", something which seems weak but is actually very powerful. When God decided to come to earth and save humanity, He did not come with massive forces or superior weaponry to deal with sin like some sort of spiritual D-Day. Instead, He came into this world in the person of His Son, as a weak and powerless baby born in a manger. The infinite God Who created the universe took on flesh and blood and humbled Himself to live as a slave.

His humility, weakness, and obedience eventually led them to a cross where God unleashed His powerful wrath and anger towards sin upon Jesus in our place, bearing our sin, and gaining our salvation. This costs Jesus His life. It separated Him for a time from His

Father. It gave Him death on a cross, a painful and shameful way of dying that is reserved for only the worst criminal.

It's easy to misunderstand what true power is in this situation and to overlook Jesus' work as being weak. We are easily attracted to and enjoy seeing more visible spectacular shows of power. This is probably one reason why more people attend church on Easter than on Good Friday. Jesus' work on the cross on Good Friday is a powerful way by which our sin is forgiven, the wrath of God is appeased, and we receive eternal life. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, although seemingly more powerful and certainly more attractive, is but a confirmation of what Jesus already accomplished on the cross. It is Jesus' humility, suffering, and death on the cross which overcomes sin, death, and Satan and gains salvation. In the area of salvation, what looks weak is actually strong and what seems powerless is actually the power of God.

The same is true for the Day of Pentecost. The day of Pentecost, which falls fifty days after Easter, is the day on which we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised several times to send power from on high to His faithful people. When we hear the words "power from on high," we are probably thinking of something spectacular and immediately noticeable. Indeed, when reading the account in Acts, we see something that is quite spectacular and attractive, but is not the power by which God changes things. If we focus on that, we miss out on God's weak/power to take care of the real problem.

What exactly is the problem facing Jesus' followers? Some might think the lack of courage, boldness, or even protection from persecution. The followers might be thinking how they might attract more people into their small group. A spectacular and noticeable sign might help with those problems. However, none of those are the real problem.

Jesus had commissioned His apostles and those who would follow them to preach the Gospel – the good news of what Jesus had won for them - to every living creature. The real problem, both for the apostles and followers at that time and for us in our time, is how to get that message to the world and how to get people to hear it.

Or lesson says, "When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them." That's quite a show, isn't it? It's very attractive and appeals to our sense of the dramatic and spectacular. There is a sound like a mighty rushing wind. There are tongues of fire which come to rest upon each of the people gathered there. Although these are divine "bells and whistles", neither the sound of the wind nor the sight of tongues of fire are the real show of God's power for the real problem here. Although these signs accompany the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the signs are not the way God chose to carry out His plan. God's power is displayed in much simpler and weaker methods.

The text says that after these signs appeared, a crowd gathered. The Jewish festival of Pentecost was being celebrated and there were Jews from all over the world there. They may have heard the sound which the apostles heard and possibly saw the tongues of fire, but that did not impress them nor did it change them. The miracle of Pentecost and the display of God's power is found in much simpler ways. After noting that all of the speakers among the apostles were Galileans and that there were representatives of Jews from all around the world, they say, "We hear them telling in our own tongue the mighty works of God."

The miracle of Pentecost is not the spectacular demonstration of the Holy Spirit's arrival. The miracle is that by God's power, all who were present heard in their own native languages the mighty works of God. The Holy Spirit used the testimony of the apostles and

the Word of God to change people's lives and create faith. Through these simple means – preaching & teaching – people repented, came to faith that day, and the size of the Christian church increased by 3000 souls.

You see, the power to get the message out was not located in what seemed to be spectacular exhibitions of power. The power to get the message out was in the Word of God. The strength was in the preaching. The results were achieved totally by the Holy Spirit working in His way, on His timetable, and through His gifts which, although seem to be weak, are very powerful.”

This is great comfort for us and great hope for the Lord's mission among us. People have often looked for powerful signs as evidence of His presence and as means to accomplish His mission. The charismatic movement, a movement which crossed denominational lines and was especially popular about 50 years ago, stressed the importance of the spectacular and dynamic “gifts of the Spirit” to determine God's presence and to guide Christians in the doing of God's mission. This movement believed that to be a true Christian, one had to exhibit these gifts – speaking in tongues, performing miracles, and other such things which were powerful and noticeable and would attract people.

Today, although that movement has died down, people still seek proof of God's spectacular power in order to have a successful church and convert the world. There is an emphasis on having a huge church building. Some churches are so big that they meet on several campuses. People think that contemporary music forms and the huge shot of emotional adrenaline which some songs might give will make a church successful and cause it to grow. Churches employ screens, smoke machines, praise bands, and many other devices with the hope that it will energize people and bring about the will of the Lord.

As Christians, we may worry when we lack some of these technological advances. We don't have the numbers to be “successful” as the world measure success. We lack inspirational and funny preachers and other things which we might enjoy. We may covet other churches' success and want to try and copy their methods in order to gain more people in the pew and more money in the collection plate.

The problem here is not always obvious to everyone. Failure to understand that may lead us away from God's will and keep us from accomplishing His mission. The problem in connecting what Jesus did to win forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life for people with those who need it is not a lack of excitement, an abundance of boredom, or not having the latest technology. The problem in obtaining salvation is the same problem that necessitated salvation in the first place: sin.

Sin not only prevents us from entering into eternal life, but it also keeps us from receiving the eternal life which Jesus won for us. The Word of God says clearly that we were dead in our transgressions and sins. Dead people can't hear anything, no matter how loud or jazzy it might be. The Scriptures also say, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14) in fact, the Bible claims, “The sinful mind is hostile to God.” (Romans 8:7)

While not claiming that any of new technology or methodologies are sinful per se, we must be very careful not to pin our hopes on any of them or we will miss God's hidden power and many will remain unconverted. What happened on that first Pentecost that changed people? What were the means by which people came to believe in Jesus Christ and receive salvation? It was not the sound of the rushing wind or the presence of tongues of fire. The text says, “and they were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking

Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?... We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

It was the speaking and the hearing of the Word of God. Now there is a miraculous element to this. These men from Galilee were given the power to speak in various known languages of the day. People from all over the world were able to understand them. But the power was not in how the message was spoken. The power was in the message that was spoken. They heard the mighty works of God. And through the message of the Word of God the mighty work of God was accomplished and 3,000 people were converted that day.

That same Holy Spirit works today without the sound of a loud rushing wind or the appearance of tongues of fire. However, He still works through the Word of God to convey the mighty works of God to us all. This Word of God is the word read in your homes, taught in Sunday school and in Bible Class, and preached in the Divine Service.

The power of the Holy Spirit coming this way seems very ordinary, even weak. However, this Word of God works new faith in those who do not have it. It strengthens the faith for those who do have it. It is the reason why there is an increase of members and it is the resource for us to do our ministry here.

Do not be deceived by anyone who emphasizes style over substance and who looks for the obvious power of this world to accomplish the Lord's will while ignoring the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our churches. Instead, continue to read the Word of God. Continue to study the Word of God with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Continue to hear the Word of God as He speaks it through those whom He is called in Divine Service. Only then shall the power of God be active among us, in our church, and in our world.

Power is important for success, especially when you're fighting an adversary who is strong. Our country needed power when it sought to invade Europe and save the free world. Through the military power of the Allies, they were successful and won the battle and eventually won the war. We are fighting a tremendous battle here but it is against the foe much stronger than Nazi Germany. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness." We, too, need power. Do not be deceived by pseudo-power or go looking for a power in the wrong place. However, use the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit will win the battle and ultimately the war. Amen