

“The Power of Love”

Introduction: When we left the followers of Jesus last week, they were “looking intently (probably staring open-mouthed) up into the sky” (Ac. 1:10). Jesus had left their sight, and even though he had told them he was going to be returning to the Father, I imagine that they were filled with questions. Where did he actually go? He was crucified, he came back from the dead, and now he’s gone again...why? He said he has something he wants us to do but we’re not to start doing it yet? And maybe most importantly, he said he’s going to give us a gift—the Holy Spirit— and with this gift comes power...well what’s this power all about?

On this day when we celebrate the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost it’s this issue of power I’d like us to reflect on for a bit. Here’s the promise of Jesus: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses . . .” (Ac. 1:8). There are a lot of ways to understand, and to exercise power. What’s this power of the Holy Spirit all about? I want to suggest to you that it’s primarily about the power love.

I. Pentecost

A. First, just a word on this event called Pentecost. It was one of three great annual Jewish festivals. It took place fifty days after Passover, the previous festival, hence the “penta” in the name. Held in May or June, Pentecost celebrated the beginning of the grain harvest. Jews from throughout the Roman Empire came to Jerusalem to give thanks to God for his material provision for them. What we see is God using the themes of these great events to teach even deeper spiritual truths. So, Passover, which celebrated God’s rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt, was used by God to reveal an even deeper rescue by Jesus from the slavery of sin. In similar fashion, God took the theme of harvest from Pentecost and applied it to the harvest of souls from among the people of the world, “from every nation under heaven” (Ac. 2:5), who were able to hear about and respond to the good news about Jesus. It led to a great harvest of people.

B. This harvest came through the Holy Spirit, who came upon the followers of Jesus with the blowing of wind, the dancing of flames of fire on their heads, and the ability to speak in languages they had never studied. These signs were just as difficult for those who were there to get their arms around as they are for us. In fact, many thought the followers of Jesus must have been drunk! Instead, the signs revealed the incredible movement of God in the lives of his people. But, while this coming of the Spirit was a unique, one-time event, the ongoing gifting of the Spirit would not be. Up to this point, the Spirit had brought order out of chaos at creation, came upon people in the OT at particular times for particular purposes (e.g. Bezalel and Gideon), and was active in the conception and birth of Jesus. But now, with Pentecost, we see the Spirit take on a wider role, coming upon each and all who put their trust in Jesus.

C. As Jesus explained, while sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, the Spirit he would send would provide those who put their trust in him with a great gift of intimacy: “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (Jn. 14:20). In this statement, we are caught up in the mystery and intimacy of the trinity, which is sometimes described as a dance in which each member of the trinity defers to and encircles the other, not seeking center stage but to be for the other in a mutually, self-giving way. It is the nature of love. Drawn by the Spirit into this dance, the Spirit’s role is to deepen our experience of God’s love, and to then empower us to love others in this kind of self-giving, sacrificial way. (A unipersonal god would be self-centered, unable to love us or reveal love to us.) It is to help us to live, as we bear witness to the goodness and glory of God, in the power of love.

## II. A Prayer for Power

A. Such love, Paul explains, comes from the ministry of the Spirit: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Ro. 5:5). We hear a prayer for this love in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (3:16-19):

I pray that out of his glorious riches [the Father] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled with the fullness of God.

It’s a prayer for love to take root in our inner being, in the control room of our lives, as Jesus, through the Spirit, comes to dwell there. The word Paul uses for dwell does not simply mean inhabit; it means living not as a roommate, but more like a spouse.

Illustration: Every married couple, at least sometime in their life together goes through it. We wake up one day and discover that for the past weeks, months, maybe years, we have been living together like roommates. We’ve been going through the motions, making our way through life but not really as husband and wife.

B. Paul wants Jesus to be our spouse, not just our roommate. He doesn’t just want us to go through the motions; he wants us to be able to grasp and have as our foundation the amazing length and width and height and depth of the love Jesus has for us, going beyond just knowing about it to experiencing it, because this love has power. Not necessarily the power to do dramatic feats, but the power to love in a self-sacrificing way, which is dramatic in and of itself! That is the power, the power of love, that changes us, and changes the world. It is the kind of power the world needs to witness. It is the kind of power that will enable us to take on the fullness of God and reflect the character of Jesus, attracting people to him.

Illustration: I always get a kick out of that question you sometimes see printed on the back of a truck: “How am I driving?” It’s typically followed by a phone number so you can call and complain if you want. Have any of us ever called that number?! No, more often, probably, we simply boycott the product that truck is carrying. I did that a few years ago with a Brooks Pharmacy truck that cut me off on the highway, resolving that I would only go to CVS from now on to satisfy all of my pharmacy needs.

D. Maybe, when it comes to the use of power, it would be good for Christians to have to carry a question and a number. How are we behaving as we bear witness to Jesus?! How are we displaying power? Are we attracting people to him or driving them away? In this vein, I can’t help but think of how some who call themselves Christian tried to wield power when attacking the Capitol building in Washington D.C. a few years ago, carrying crosses and placards praising Jesus as they spread violence throughout the building. Friends, that is worldly power, not Holy Spirit power. That use of power has nothing to do with Jesus and even drives people away from him. To be sure, the cross is important. It’s where we come to grasp the length and width and height and depth of the love of Jesus for us. But the power that is on display there is sacrificial and self-giving. It’s the power of goodness and love, not of hatred and violence.

So, as we make our way to the table of the Lord this morning, may we reflect on the kind of power that is on display there. May we take the love that it reveals to heart. May our lives demonstrate that kind of power, the power of love, as we bear witness to our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord.