

Title: Power Revisited
Text: John 15:26 – 27; 16:4b –7, 12 - 15
Date: May 20, 2018

So I am wondering: How many of you woke up with a palpable sense of excitement knowing that today was Pentecost? How many of you woke up even vaguely aware that today was Pentecost? Well maybe we might have a few more people wearing red this morning.

Poor Pentecost. Almost seems like the step-child of Christian religious holidays, compared to Christmas and Easter. I'd be surprised if any of you have family plans for your annual Pentecost dinner. Perhaps tongues-of-fire barbecue?

Now for those of us who have been reading the Bible over the years, when you think of Pentecost, you think of the dramatic account recorded in the second chapter of Acts. Forgetting that this was actually a Jewish holiday before it was a Christian holiday, we think of the dramatic events of that day. **“And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”** (Acts 2: 2 -4)

When I was a young Christian – maybe 13 years of age – I remember being captivated by this story. I longed to have that experience of the Spirit coursing through my veins. The whole Book of Acts sparked my imagination as I read of powerful speeches that moved thousands, and as I read of the disciples healing the sick. I wanted that kind of power.

Though you might think that this sounds laudable, I can look back now on those aspirations and see things in a much more nuanced way. While it sounds impressive for a young person to be “sold out for Jesus,” I can see now that mixed in with that was perhaps an adolescent attraction to power. Wouldn't it be great to have the power to heal? *Then* people would take me seriously. *Then* people would recognize that I was a force to be reckoned with.

But beyond chronological age, anyone whose faith formation is in an adolescent stage of development can be subject to the same mixed motives. So we need a discerning spirit when passionate pastors work up a lather and say, “Do you want the power? Do you want the power?” And if we find ourselves being attracted to “the power,” perhaps we need to think this through a bit. And it may not be just supernatural power. Some people have discovered a power in constantly letting people know what exemplary Christians they are. It is a similar kind of adolescent neediness.

All this reveals a fundamental misunderstanding. When the Holy Spirit is *really* at work, it is never about *our* power.

We like to hear stories of power, and that is partially why I did *not* focus on the Acts 2 passage this Pentecost. The temptation when preaching on Pentecost is to make the sermon a story of something that happened. [past tense] But what does that have to do with today?

That is why I decided to focus on this passage from John. It was Jesus' words that we read this morning, delivered prior to his arrest and crucifixion. Here Jesus gives us a different perspective on the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Jesus anticipated the anxiety of the disciples when he spoke of his departure saying, **“But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.”** (16:6) He goes on, however, to make a counter-intuitive claim by saying, **“Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”** (16:7) So Jesus actually claims that it is to our advantage that he moves on.

When the Spirit is described as an Advocate, this is hardly a power word. It can be a legal word, that might sometimes refer to a legal counsel. The literal meaning is one who stands alongside of another, such as a helper or comforter. Rather gentle, supportive words, I would say.

Later on we read, **“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”** (16:13) When Jesus says **“all truth,”** he does *not* appear to be referring to head knowledge.

This touches on a theme I have tried to highlight before. *True* growth in our understanding of God *invariably* leads to growth in understanding ourselves. If it doesn't lead to personal transformation, it is just a head trip - *not* a deeper understanding of God. Conversely, *true* growth in an understanding of *ourselves* invariably leads to a deeper understanding of God. I believe this principle to be true. Our spiritual knowledge and self-knowledge are intertwined. The Greek word for truth - *aletheia* - has more of a sense of un-concealing or uncovering what has been there all along.

And so Jesus says, **“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”** (16:12) More than extraordinary claims about the future that are too hard to grasp, I believe this might be more a reference to your personal readiness to even let go of some of your cherished certitudes. Again, I see this as relating to the interconnection between self-understanding and spiritual growth.

If your version of Christian growth relates to accumulating more historical facts, and an ability to quote more commentators, you are still in the shallow end of the pool. The Spirit, the *paraclete*, wants to come alongside you and lead you into truths that will make you squirm - that will make you uncomfortable - because it will become very personal. I don't care if you are 60 or 70 or 80; the Spirit wants to lead you into more truth. Maybe more truth than you can bear now.

We need to come back to that word “power” again. If you haven't figured it out by now, Jesus' understanding of power is totally different than the world's understanding. Pentecost power is not intended to equip you to impress people or mow down your opponents. When the Spirit of truth comes - *when you are ready to bear it* - you will be led into a deeper understanding of yourself than you ever imagined. You will find power in humility. The Spirit will uncover parts of you that have remained hidden . . . *and it will be OK*. You will no longer feel the need to be a hot shot, to win arguments, or be the coolest kid on the block. And *therein you will find unexpected power*, for you no longer need to prove yourself, having discovered more grace than you ever imagined.

This, of course, changes how we relate to others. Madeline L'Engle describes it this way: **“If God's peace is in our hearts, we carry it with us, and it can be given to those around us, not by our own will or virtue, but by the Holy Spirit working through us. We cannot give what we do not have, but if the spirit blows through the dark clouds, and enters our hearts, we can be used as vehicles of peace, and our own peace will be thereby deepened. The more peace we give away, the more we have.”**

We are not describing a path of super-spirituality. Ken Wilber says, **“The spiritual path always begins elitist, and ends egalitarian. Always!”** I have found to be true. I no longer seek Pentecostal power. In this School of Love, I just long for us to have all things in common.

Maybe it is just as well that we don't turn Pentecost into another silly season, complete with Hallmark cards. Maybe it is just as well that this is a quiet invitation for you to give permission to the Holy Spirit – the Spirit you already have – to do the deep work necessary to lead you into all truth. Can you bear it? If you even nervously keep moving on this journey, you will never regret it.

Amen.

John 15:26 – 27

²⁶ “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷ You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

John 16:4b –7, 12 - 15

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵ But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.