

Pentecost next week is a Christian celebration of the Holy Spirit. Today, we heard in Acts Chapter 1 about the disciples waiting for the Spirit in Jerusalem, waiting for empowerment, before spreading news to the world. The power of the Spirit, the power of Christ, is a different kind of “power” than we normally think about. It is definitely not a win/lose kind of power, not a power that wins or dominates by exploiting or oppressing others. The Power of the Holy Spirit must be a power that has to do with the qualities of Jesus himself, who John says was “full of grace and truth.” You may remember the story about a contest between the wind and the sun, about who could make a man take off his jacket. The wind blew and blew, and the person then held onto the jacket more tightly. But then the sun came out and gently, gradually warmed things up, so the man eventually took off his jacket! It is not by might nor coercion, but Jesus’ kind of power has more to do with gentleness and persuasion. In Gospel stories, Jesus never forced himself on people, but was gracious, and would move along unless asked to stay (see “Road to Emmaus” Lk 24)

One writer for the Daily Devotionals of the United Church of Christ spoke of “God’s PPE:” the personal protective equipment or “clothing” that are the “fruits of the Spirit,” enumerated by Paul in Galatians Chapter 5: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” In other letters, Paul suggests that we “clothe” ourselves with these qualities. God’s “clothing in the Spirit” is paradoxically the power of LETTING GO. There are several sayings about letting go being forwarded around the internet recently. 1. “If you want God to open doors then let go of the doorknob!” (We may think of the book of Revelation where Jesus says I stand at the door and knock.) 2. “Serenity comes when you trade your expectations for acceptance.” (This speaks of rigid expectations, and we remember Paul’s words: I have learned to be content in all circumstances.) And finally, 3. “Give it to God and go to sleep!” (Recall the story of Jesus napping in the back of a boat during a storm!)

There are different ways we can experience spiritual power at different times of our life. Youth may be looking more for courage, leaping into the unknown, leaping into postgraduate time, taking risks. Maybe for young adults, the power of the Spirit may have more to do with being your true self,

living into your own true self and your own gifts. Maybe as elderly adults, the power of the spirit is the wisdom of letting go, letting others lead. We remember Jesus saying “when you are old, another will dress you and lead you where you would rather not go.” (John 21:18).

One of our writers for the UCC devotionals, Marchee' Grair, spoke about a kindergarten experience. She remembered her own story as a 5 year old girl, when she needed the power of patience. She remembers that she was impatient about brushing her teeth and did not want to wait for her mother to help, so she grabbed the toothpaste and toothbrush... “Do it myself” was her cry, and then she dropped a huge glob of toothpaste on her new dress, and that was the day of their school pictures! She said she wished she had more patience as a young child. We know that haste can make waste! There is power in patience!

One more good story from Mary Luti, of the UCC writer’s group, about the power of letting go in our prayers. She tells the story of an Episcopal bishop in Massachusetts, who told a story about a man in an earthquake. The earthquake was so traumatic that he couldn't remember any of his memorized prayers. All that came to his mind was the alphabet. So he began to pray the alphabet: Dear God, “A,B,C,D,E,F,G.....” If we did that, maybe a letter might remind us of something or someone to pray for! Today with the letter B for example, we could pray for Brazil and their president Bolsonaro, since that is a current hotspot or epicenter of the coronavirus. “Praying the alphabet” when we can't think of words may be as valid as any other prayer. (We recall that Paul said “the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”) Mary Luti muses that we all may be just praying the alphabet (or speechlessly sighing) as the world is shaking all around us.

So there is a paradox in the Bible: Letting go, getting in touch with weakness and vulnerability somehow can become a form of power for us, as with the disciples who were “waiting” and praying together, to be empowered for leadership. All through the Bible there are stories of unlikely people that were “chosen” to be leaders for God. Paul said “how many of you were rich how many of you were noble? How many of you were powerful, and yet God has called you!” There is power in weakness that asks and prays for God's

help. Paul said he would boast of his weaknesses; then everyone would know he was relying on God, relying on help from the Spirit.

Another form of power I'd like to mention is the power of community itself. We heard thankfulness this morning for seeing the familiar faces of people in this Belleville community. These faces we see on Zoom are the faces of those who are thinking about us, praying for us, as we are praying for them. We are also thinking with each other about how to move forward in these trying times. The proverbs were clear that with a “multitude of advisers” or an “abundance of counselors” there is wisdom. Why do churches and organizations have committees? I know people can grow very tired of committee work. But the chief reason and duty of committee work is that we do get much input; we get many opinions so that we can begin to synthesize ideas for wiser decisions. That's why scholars insist that Bible study is best done in a group, to interpret as best we can with the input and the experience of many. It's fine to read by ourselves and yes there is a time for solitude, but in terms of interpretation, we are wiser when we consider varied life experiences.

Perhaps the best evidence of power in the Spirit is that lives are changed; there is a power that can “turn a soul around” as one song says. When lives are transformed, we know the Spirit is active. It is very obvious in the lives of Peter and Paul. Peter we know was cowardly, as he denied knowing Jesus at least three times. Then we hear that Peter became a bold and courageous preacher for the cause of Christ. Paul also had a radically changed life. We remember that Paul was a murderer of Christians, but then he becomes a chief spokesperson for Jesus. Pause and think for a minute of people you admire who have turned their lives around with the help of Christian practice, or other spiritual practices. And thank God that none of us has ever fully “made it,” that we are never totally whole or complete; none can boast of spiritual superiority. Rather, we rely on our spiritual practices (and most of us need them daily!) to keep renewing our lives, seeking to show forth the fruits of the Spirit, in a process of continual transformation.

So in conclusion, Jesus said to the disciples, stay put for awhile (shelter at home?!) and wait for the power of the Holy Spirit that will indeed come

upon you. Wait and pray... and then you will be ready to go out into the world and be my witnesses. The continuation of the story from Acts Chapter 1 is that his disciples, men and women and his mother Mary all “devoted themselves to prayer.” They stayed in Jerusalem and they prayed continually until they felt more power of the Spirit and until that day of Pentecost when there was an even more powerful presence of God’s Spirit. We will explore that more next week on Pentecost Sunday.

Hopefully all of us will pray regularly and often this week, so that we can really experience the power of the Holy Spirit in a new way, perhaps in a stronger way. Let's find new spiritual power. Let's rediscover power in the Holy Spirit, the kind of power that Jesus exemplified and promised. Let's re-define power, God’s kind of power.... the power of love, kindness, patience, compassion, humility, gentleness, self-control, etc., and then we will better be able to weather our current losses, restrictions, and fears. I'm going to end with song medley, a prayer medley, starting with a Ken Medema song, and then a couple verses each of “Amazing Grace” and “Precious Lord.” Please pray it with me, a way of letting go, opening and waiting, sure to receive the Spirit as promised.

*Lord, listen to your children praying, Lord send your Spirit in this place. Lord, listen to your children praying, send us love, send us power, send us grace..... Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a soul like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see. Through many dangers toils and snares, I have already come. Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home..... Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand, I am tired, I'm weak, I'm worn; through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light: take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home. When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near, when my life is almost gone: hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall; take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*