

The Story of God and Us: The Holy Spirit and the Church

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July 19, 2020

Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:1-8

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:1-8 (NRSV)

We're looking at this whole narrative, this story of "God and Us" so I want us to continue to not just look at individual pieces but to look at the whole story. I want us to read what we've been learning so far over the last seven weeks. And join me as we say that together.

God created the world and everything in it because God desired a relationship with us. We have free will and our SIN moves us away from God so decidedly that we cannot overcome the separation on our own. But God reaches out to us to overcome our separation by creating COVENANTS - agreements to take care of us that God will uphold no matter what.

Through the INCARNATION of Jesus, we were brought into the deepest possible intimacy with God. Jesus entered the world to lead us back into the harmony from which we had fallen away to ATONE for our sins on the cross, overcoming the powers of evil. Victory over sin and death was achieved when Jesus was RESURRECTED after the crucifixion. God dwells in each Christian to guide, strengthen, and comfort through the HOLY SPIRIT.

The Spirit assembled a community of believers to become the church that worships and fulfills God's mission: to inaugurate the Kingdom on Earth. One day God will COMPLETE the new creation. There will be no more evil or suffering, and everything in the world will be restored and set right.

Let's pray together. O God open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve you and our neighbors. Amen.

Last week I began the sermon with a lame preacher's joke, and I think I'm going to continue that tradition today. So, this Aggie walks into the Home Depot. Now let me say that you can replace Aggie with whatever group of alumni you'd like to disparage. It can be the University of Texas Longhorns, or Sooners, or Duke Blue Devils, or North Carolina Tar Heels, or whoever you feel you'd like to disparage. I'm going to choose Aggies as a brand name.

So, an Aggie walks into the Home Depot and he buys a chain saw. He takes the chain saw home and the first day it works well, and he can cut down five trees and he's really proud that he can do that. The next day he goes out and the chain saw doesn't work quite as well, and he can only cut down three trees. Then the third day he works really hard, but he can only cut down one tree. And he's getting frustrated, so he goes back to the Home Depot, and he gives them chain saw and says it's not working right. He said, "I just bought it three days ago, and it's not working."

The guy takes the saw and he pulls the cord and starts it up and it goes "RRRRR!" The Aggie said, "What's that noise?"

I don't know if you get it or not, but apparently, he hadn't been starting the chainsaw and using the power that was available,

On the day of Pentecost, the 120 followers of Jesus were gathered together in one place with people from all over the world of that day. And all of a sudden, they heard the sound of a rush as a mighty wind. They asked, "What's that noise?"

Today we're talking about the Holy Spirit and the power that it can give to us. I've been reading a lot about power this week as I've been studying for this message. You know that power is an important thing. How do you get power? How do you keep power? Why do some people have power, and some don't? What do you do with power when you have it?

We use the word *empower*. Here at St. Luke's in our mission's ministry, we really want to focus on ministries that empower people.

As I said, I've been reading about this, and there's a professor at Berkley named Dacher Keltner who's an empirical psychologist, and he's done a great deal of research about how power functions. He wrote a book called *The Power Paradox*, and he said that his research shows that real power comes from demonstrating compassion, empathy, and giving and pursuing the greater good. However, he said that once that one receives power and seems to take hold of that power, there are principles to follow. And he has a whole series of principles. Here are principles 13, 14, and 15: "Principle 13: Power leads to empathy deficits and diminished moral sentiments. Principle 14: Power leads to self-serving impulsivity. Principle 15: Power leads to incivility and disrespect."

In other words, you get power in one way, but once you have it you begin to act in a different way. That's like the old saying, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

On the other hand, there is a professor named Jeffrey Pfeffer who's a business professor. He's written a book about power titled *Power, Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*. Here's what he writes: "Leaders touting their own careers as models to be emulated frequently gloss over the power plays they actually used to get to the top. Meanwhile, the teaching on leadership is filled with prescriptions about following an inner compass, being truthful, letting inner feelings show, being modest and self-effacing, not behaving in a bullying or abusive way - in short prescriptions about how people wish the world and the powerful behaved. There is no doubt that the world would be a much better, more humane place if people were always

authentic, modest, truthful, and consistently concerned for the welfare of others instead of pursuing their own aims. But that world doesn't exist."

One is a very positive view on how one gets power, and the other view is more cynical. How about you? Where do you think power comes from? What is it for?

Today in Scripture, we have two appearances of the risen Christ. The first one is in Matthew as the disciples are gathered in Galilee. They're waiting for Jesus, and he appears to them. Here's what he says to them: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore..." Matthew 28:18-19. The word used here that is translated *authority* is *exousia*. That means "power from without." It is a power that has been given to you, and it's the same word that Jesus uses in Mathew 10 when he gives this to the disciples. He says, "I give you authority over unclean spirits and to heal every disease and every sickness..." This idea that you have been authorized to do something. *Exousia* with the prefix *ex*, meaning *from without*. Jesus has all authority given to him by the Father, and he gives that authority to us.

The second Scripture is found in Luke, and it is the disciples gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. Jesus appears to them and here's what he says: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Luke 1:8)". So here the word that's translated *power* is *dunamis*, like dynamic. It is a different image of power.

Here's the best way I can explain it. *Exousia*, translated here as *authority* or in some places as *power*, is positional power. It's power that you have been given. Look at this way, your boss can fire you because that is her job. She has been given the authority to decide whether you keep working or not. The bishop has authorized me, has given me the authority to be the pastor of this church. But the Holy Spirit has to give me the gifts that I need to actually do it - to give me the skills and the leadership and the preaching to pastor. One is an external positional authority given me, and the other is an internal, a tangible power able to make something happen.

Here's what I want us to understand today. That Jesus gives us, his followers, authority, the Holy Spirit gives us power. Jesus gives us *exousia*, authority; the Holy Spirit gives us power.

So, we have authority and power, but for what? I really want to share two things about that. The first is - authority and power to live our daily lives as a part of the kingdom of God. Authority and power to live the Christian life every single day.

We talked a few weeks ago about the Incarnation and that when Jesus came, he said, "The Kingdom of God is here. It's at hand. It's available to you." And he taught us a whole new way of life, a whole new operating system. It's like with computers moving from MS DOS to the Apple operating system, where you move from PC to Apple. It's a whole different way of functioning. A whole different way of living. Not just a different thing to believe in but a whole different way to live.

And it's completely upside down from the ways of the world. How in God's name can we live like that? How in God's name can we turn the other cheek when someone hits us on one cheek? How in God's name when a soldier tells us to pick up his pack and carry it a mile, which was required in the Roman world - if the soldier asked you to carry it for a mile, you had to do it. But the Scripture tells us to not just carry it one mile but to carry it for two miles. How in God's name can we choose not to be angry with our brother? How in God's name can we give away our possessions to the poor and come and follow Jesus? How in God's name can we pray for our enemies? And bless those who persecute us? How in God's name can we treat with real love and real respect people who disagree so profoundly with us? How in God's name can we practice this incredible sense of love and respect for other people? How in God's name can we get through and break the bonds of an addiction that we struggle with? How in God's name can we get through the day when we've been dealing with a grief that is so incredibly heartbreaking, that we can keep moving forward when something we can't even imagine has happened? How in God's name can we resist evil and oppression and injustice and hatred and speak out against it? How in God's name can we some days just get up and put one foot in front of the other, just one foot in front of the other to get through the day? How in God's name can we claim joy even in the midst of incredible disappointment?

How in God's name can someone on a cross forgive the very people who crucified him? How can that happen? That's the kingdom of God - that's what Jesus has taught us. How in the world could that happen?

I know how. "What's that noise?" That's the Holy Spirit that comes and fills us. That Christ has given us the *exousia*, the authority and the Holy Spirit gives us the power to live as Jesus taught us to live, to love as Jesus loved.

Now one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith is that we receive power only when we choose to give away our own power. Only when we choose to pour out our own power does God choose to fill us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus on a cross was powerless in a sense, and yet he had the power given by God to forgive us.

Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2: "And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (1 Cor. 2:3-5)" You see, he comes in weakness so the Spirit of God can come in power. We give away our own power so that we might be filled with the Spirit's power. In Ephesians 3:16 Paul says, "I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit..."

I recently had a conversation with a woman, and this is a crazy story. She and her husband had been married for a long time, and then he left her for another woman. They divorced, and after some period of time, he got cancer. The other woman he'd married left him. And so, his first wife just invited him to come back to her home so she could care for him. As she told me that story, I thought, "How in the world, how in God's name do you find the ability to do that? To care for the one who had just rejected you?" She said, "I don't know. The Holy Spirit just put it on my heart that I needed to care for him." It's an amazing thing.

We often think of the Holy Spirit as that force within us that does great miracles and healings, and certainly, the Scripture is full of that. But the Holy Spirit is the one who comes alongside us. The word in the Gospel of John is *paraclete*, meaning *the one who comes alongside us*. To work within us to transform us – the word is sanctify. That we might have the authority and the power to live our daily lives in the Kingdom of God. To live that Christian life.

Jesus gives us the authority, and the Holy Spirit gives us the power to live our daily lives in the kingdom of God. Now here's the second thing. We are given the authority and the power for the church to accomplish her mission.

Last week we talked about how God is renewing creation and that the resurrection was that the new creation was launched with the moment of resurrection. And that we get to be a part of that new creation. How is that new creation to happen? How is the world to know about that? Well, listen again to the Scripture that we read. First, from Matthew - how does it happen? Jesus says to those eleven disciples, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." That's

everybody. "...Baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you and remember, I am with you always even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19, 20)

That's how it's to happen. How does it happen in the book of Acts? There Luke, the writer, says, "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). Look, this is the mission of the church to bring about, to point to that renewal of God's creation.

The United Methodist Church's mission statement is "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Here at St. Luke's, we talk about our mission statement, and it's to "equip families and individuals to live and love like Jesus" towards our vision of a "city transformed by the love of Jesus." Both are saying essentially the same thing. That we are in the business of creating disciples so that the world around us will be transformed, and a new creation will be prepared for the return of Christ.

How in the world can that happen through the church? John Knox was a great Scottish Presbyterian theologian and lived in the 1500s. It's funny how you can remember these simple statements from a seminary, which was so many years ago for me. But Knox said, "The soul *residuum* (leftover) of the Christ event is the church." Let me read specifically what he said in the 16th century: "The only difference between the world as it had been just after the event [of Christ] and the world as it had been just before is that the church was now in existence. A new kind of human community had emerged; a new society had come into being. There was absolutely nothing else besides." It's up to the church.

Lesslie Newbigin was a missionary in the 20th century. He came out of the Church of South India and ultimately became their first bishop in the official Church of South India. He writes a great deal on what ultimately became in the 1990s something called the Missional Church movement. I love the language he uses. He says, "The church is to be the sign, a foretaste, and an instrument of the kingdom of God."

It's a sign we point to how the kingdom of God is growing around us, a foretaste so that when you're a part of that community you get - that's the word - a foretaste, an experience of what the kingdom of God is like. And as an instrument where God uses the church to bring about the kingdom, to bring about that new creation.

How can that happen? Can you imagine? It seems like a ludicrous commission to those eleven disciples sitting in a room where he says, "Go make the whole world as disciples, you eleven people!" Or even to the 120 who were gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came? He says, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth!" Such a lofty call! How in the world could that happen?

What's that noise?

That's the Holy Spirit, and you will receive power, it says. *Dunamis*. And Jesus says to the disciples, "All authority (*exousia*) had been given to me..." Then he gives it to them, and that's what happened. That's how it will happen.

Here's one more quotation. Will Willimon is a retired bishop in the United Methodist Church and he's a professor at Duke. His commentary of the Book of Acts, which is so much about the power of the Holy Spirit, and here's what he writes: "Jesus came preaching, not simply a new philosophy of life but a new way of living..." to "teach all that I have commanded you even to the end of the age"...He formed a new people, a new community.

I love this. "The Acts question is not merely the intellectual one of 'Do you agree?' but the social question, 'Will you join up?'"

That's my question for you today. Will you join up? Will you sign up for this mission of living and loving like Jesus? And teaching the whole world and witnessing to the whole world about what he taught and how he lived?

Will you be willing to pour out your own power and give it away so that God might fill you with God's power in the Holy Spirit? Will you be his witnesses, the witnesses of Jesus in River Oaks, in West University, in Gulfton? In Tanglewood, in Timbergrove, and in Sharpstown and in your neighborhood and in your school and in your workplace and in your family. Will you be his witnesses? Will you be part of this movement of God, that the Holy Spirit has created to bring about the new creation. Will you join up?

Let's pray together. *O Gracious and loving God, we want so much to live and love like Jesus. We want so much to be his witnesses, to make disciples, to teach others to live and love as he did. We want so much to fulfill the mission of the church to be a part of the world's transformation and renewal. But we can't do that on our own power, but only by yours as your Holy Spirit anoints us. So, we pray that we might open our hearts to be filled by you. Amen.*