

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the day we celebrate what is known to us as Pentecost Sunday. This is the day we celebrate the coming of or the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the church. This is the day we give thanks with prayer and praise that the Holy Spirit has entered into our hearts. However, I think it's fair to say that every Sunday ought to be considered Pentecost Sunday because the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us every Sunday and we in turn are empowered by that Holy Spirit to do the will of God. In our Gospel the pouring out of the Holy Spirit is made known when Jesus enters into a gathering and says...

²¹... "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:21b-23)

With this blessing of the Holy Spirit, we are sent. Our mission then as Baptized Christians who are part of the body of Christ we know as the church...are empowered by our very faith that we claim to have...to continue the work of Jesus Christ to make God known in the world...out there not in here. By the same token then, this becomes our sin according to St. John who teaches in the Gospel of John that "sin" is NOT a moral category about behavior, rather it is a theological category about one's response to the revelation of God in Jesus...here is our sin...because we assume we cannot forgive sins.¹

When we are empowered by the Holy Spirit and sent in the Lord's peace to make God known in the world, what is our response? What do we do? Our response ought to be as Jesus tells us, to forgive the sins of those we encounter. But our assumed inability becomes our sin because we are quick to say, I cannot do this; I don't have that kind of power to forgive sins. Lord knows I have enough of my own sin; I don't want to get tangled up with someone else's sins if I cannot forgive their sins.

This type of spiritual mediocrity only betrays the power of the Holy Spirit and our response to God becomes, as John would say, sinful. This happens because we look at the big picture. What I mean to say is, we see a long journey instead of the small simple first step. Our response to God is much simpler than we know. However, we tend to fear doing this when we don't fully understand the Holy Spirit and we in turn underestimate the reality of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity living and working in each of us.²

For some, power is frightening. When we hear about the "power" of the Holy Spirit that has been given to us as Baptized individuals as well as members of the Body of Jesus Christ known as the church, it calls to mind all that Jesus has done and that kind of power scares us. Unfortunately, some are not scared and the power given to us is corrupted with self-indulgence...and this suddenly becomes about "me" and "my" assumed power.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Bible, In Twelve Volumes, Volume Nine, The Gospel of Luke, The Gospel of John.* Nashville: Abington Press, 1995. The Gospel of John 9:1-12, The Healing Miracle, page 653.

² Van Harn, Roger E.. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Second Readings: Acts and Epistles.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the Day of Pentecost, Years A, B, C, page 524.

Power is something that has been misused by the church. Our abuse of this power and the corruption that the church has caused with this so-called power has sent many running from the church and this call or it leaves us to simply grumble, I don't have that kind of power nor do I want it. We tend to misunderstand power by viewing it as a "force" applied to someone or something to act in a particular way we think they should. When in truth, Jesus uses the very power of God to direct and influence the behavior of others by showing them or engaging them in the power of grace and forgiveness.

There is a very brilliant scene in the movie Schindler's List that really shows our misunderstanding of power. Oscar Schindler is talking with Amon Göth, who is a German SS commandant of the Kraków Concentration Camp in German-occupied Poland during WWII. Göth is fall-down drunk after a party at his house on the grounds of the camp and he and Schindler are talking about power. Schindler has been drinking with Göth and asks why he drinks lousy booze he calls motor oil. Göth says to Schindler, "Your never drunk, that's real control, control is power." Schindler then asks Göth if that's why the Jews fear us? Göth says we have the power to kill them that's why they fear us. Schindler responds to Göth by saying, "They fear us because we have the power to kill arbitrarily...a man commits a crime...he should know better...we have him killed and we feel pretty good about it...or we kill him ourselves and we feel even better. That's not power though, that's justice, that's different than power. Power is when we have every justification to kill and we don't." He goes on to tell of the criminal who throws himself at the mercy of the emperor and the emperor absolves him of his crime. The scene is explaining the the power of forgiveness. The next scene shows Göth awkwardly attempting to forgive a stable boy for mishandling his horse's saddle.

In our case, when we have every justification to judge and condemn and we show grace and forgiveness, we have just revealed God's power revealed in the mercy of Jesus Christ...and this is the power we are sent with. As we are sent by Jesus Christ, we are sent with the power to recognize sin and condemn it but we don't, we forgive, or we are gracious.

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. Jesus does not send us to judge, to justify, or to condemn, Jesus sends us by our faith, with the power to show grace and mercy in the face of condemnation...this is the power we are sent with. What then does this mean? In part, it means that we have received the Holy Spirit and now by our faith we are sent to be grace and forgiveness in a graceless and unforgiving world. In other words, the grace and forgiveness we present is the very incarnation of God or the personification, or manifestation of God...that was, is, and will be forever, Jesus Christ. If the death of Jesus marked the end of that incarnation, what happens to the grace and forgiveness in a graceless and unforgiving world? Does this die too?

The Holy Spirit enables us to see that God is made manifest in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is made manifest in the grace and forgiveness we are given to share with the world. But then comes the challenge of making that grace and forgiveness known by us...who by faith are sent in peace to be that grace and forgiveness in a graceless and unforgiving world. But Jesus even knows that the Holy Spirit is going to need some help with us.

Earlier in this Gospel we hear Jesus reminding us:

¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, (*an Advocate also known as a Paraclete*) to be with you for ever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. (John 14:16-17)

Jesus goes on to say:

¹⁸ 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14:18-20)

By the Holy Spirit our faith is awakened and we are empowered in the relationship we share with the Triune God. The Advocate, the Paraclete becomes our exhorter...our voice when challenged, our comforter, and our helper. God's will is accomplished through us, not because of us. Nonetheless, it seems like a very daunting call that may send some running in the opposite direction, but it is much simpler than it seems.

I mentioned a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer last week, however I mention it again this week because it resolves the magnitude of the power, we think we have or the power we are so frightened of in this call before us today. Dietrich Bonhoeffer illustrates the power of simply listening to each other this way:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. *So it is His work that we do* for our brothers (& sisters) when we learn to listen to him.....listening can be a greater service than speaking.³

This is what we hear today in our first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon all the different peoples and tribes who were speaking in their own languages...but they were heard...they were understood because they were speaking about God's deeds of power. They were listening to each other, they were being heard and understood in their own language.

Earlier in John's Gospel we hear the words of Jesus relating to this event taking place in the first lesson today among these different people:

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. (John 16:13-15)

Likewise, Bonhoeffer reminds us again,

God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom for me God made this person in His image. I can never know before hand how God's image should appear

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together, A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub, 1954. Taken from the discussion in Chapter Four on Ministry under the heading of "The Ministry of Listening" page 97-98.

in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation. To me the sight may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every (person) in the likeness of His Son the Crucified.⁴

When we reflect and discern the reality of the creator God and the majesty and glory of God, we measure this with the power we think we are given. But as we reflect and discern the depth of God's love and mercy for us it seems too vast for us to fully understand, or even grasp, but before us is a simple piece of bread and a sip of wine that enables to begin to see the power of the blessed relationship we are called into with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God's power is not ours, what we are given this day is the power of God working through us. We are not called and sent to be the power that saves the world, Jesus has already accomplished that by saving us and those like us who are sinners. May this be the power we reveal as we go from here today...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Ibid., page 93.