

The Gift of Power

On this Mother's Day, chances are that you're thinking about your mother. Mothers are powerful people in our lives, aren't they? When you were a child, your mother had power over when you went to bed and when you got up; when you did your homework and when you could go out to play. She had power over what you wore, because she picked out your clothes or made them herself. She had power over what you ate—you couldn't have dessert until you ate your veggies. She had power over the type of friends you hung out with. And if you disobeyed her, she had power to impose consequences. As you grew older, she had power to mold your character and shape the person you would become. Because she loved you, she used her power to bring goodness to your life.

Speaking of power. If you've read the paper or turned on your TV recently, you know that elections are coming up this year. You've heard the pundits talking. You've seen some campaign ads. Unofficial polls already suggest who are the front-runners and who are currently lagging behind. Undeclared

candidates weigh the pros and cons, deliberating on whether or not to throw a proverbial hat in the ring. Elected office—on the local, state, or national level—is not without a certain amount of power; power that can be wielded for good. Or not.

And human beings have always craved power.

Even in Jesus's day. Remember how, in the gospels, two of his followers come sidling up to him, requesting that he do whatever they ask? Saying: *Teacher, if you don't mind, please see to it that we get the two highest positions in your kingdom, one at your right hand and one at your left.* They're anticipating a Jesus administration, and they want the top cabinet posts. These two disciples covet power—and to heck with the other ten!

Jesus has spent three years with the twelve. Sharing fellowship with them. Teaching with words and by example what it means to follow him. But they just don't seem to get it. Even after Jesus has suffered and died and been raised from the dead. Even after the cross and the empty tomb.

During this season of Easter, we've read the church's treasured stories of Jesus appearing to his followers. And opening their minds to understand the scriptures. For forty days.

In the Bible, we find several accounts of forty-day experiences. Noah and his family on the ark. Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus fasting in the wilderness. A forty-day period represents a time of preparation. And for forty days after his resurrection, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for what's to come. Has been talking with them about the nature of God's eternal kingdom.

But now, as these forty days draw to a close, the eleven are focusing on another kind of kingdom. Another *kind* of power. They still don't get it. If you and I had been among them would *we* have gotten it? Knowing, as they know, that the grave could not hold Jesus?

They believe that now, *no one* can stop Jesus. They believe that with one hand tied behind his back, he can run off Pontius Pilate and all the rest of the despised Romans who occupy their country. They believe it's all about their own nation. They believe that Jesus will make Israel strong and free again, just like it was back in the good old days, in the glory days of King David.

Jesus—they want to know—*Jesus, is this when you're going to do it? Is this when you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?* That's what the disciples are asking.

And the words of Jesus' answer are the very last words they—and we—hear him speak. Words that carry great significance. He says: *You don't get to know the time. That's not your concern. You have other things to think about. The Holy Spirit will come upon you. You're going to receive Spirit power. Soon! And then you'll be my witnesses. In Jerusalem. In all Judea and Samaria. And all over the world!*

These last words of Jesus foretell what's going to happen in this narrative we know as the Acts of the Apostles. Acts was authored by Luke, who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. The Gospel is part one. Acts is part two. It's a two-volume work.

Acts picks up where the Gospel leaves off. And right here at the beginning of Acts, it's as though Luke pulls back a curtain. It's almost as though we're standing right there beside those who with their own eyes see Jesus lifted up. Into a cloud, into the very presence and power of the Almighty One.

Luke reveals and presents us with a truly cosmic event. The Ascension of Christ is commemorated in many Christian communities as a major festival day. The psalmist exults that our God has gone up with a shout. Ascension Sunday shouts in triumph! On Ascension Sunday, we who are the church are in celebration mode!

Yet sometimes—just as with the resurrection itself—isn't there a part of us twenty-first century people that wants to know a bit more about the *how* of the Ascension? Aren't we tempted to get bogged down in details—like, for instance, the power of gravity? For we live in a rational age whose citizens tend to demand empirical evidence. An age whose citizens are inclined to be skeptical of miracle and mystery.

But you and I bear the name of Christ! And we believe the truth of Scripture. We confess it with our lips. We see it through lenses of faith. And we want to see Jesus. Don't you think that if we *had* been there, we might have been doing what those first disciples were doing—watching and continuing to look upward even when Jesus is no longer visible?

Like them, we might have been so intent as not even to have noticed the presence of two white-robed beings, who bear a

striking resemblance to the two who stood beside his tomb. We may not have been aware of them until they speak: *Why are you standing there gazing into the skies?*

Until Jesus comes back, you've got other things to do, these two seem to be saying. Jesus is no longer with you physically. But he's already given you your marching orders. So you need to get busy—continuing the work that he's begun. You need to get busy becoming Christ's body in and for a hurting world. Being his mouth—proclaiming the good news of God's coming kingdom. Being his hands—offering kindness and comfort and care. Being his feet—going to those who have never heard of the hope that is in him and his saving grace. Being his arms—reaching out to the forgotten. And the outcast. And the powerless.

My sisters and brothers, Jesus calls you and me to follow him in a ministry that's radically countercultural. We are not of the world. But we *are in* the world. And it's a world that seeks out not the powerless, but the powerful. As if by associating with power, some of it might rub off.

We live in a culture that would have us embrace the illusion that we have the power to do it all. A culture that encourages and

urges us to multi-task. To juggle. To keep all the balls in the air at once and not drop any of them. It's all about us. All about being independent and in control. All about what we can do on our own.

And we live in a society that conditions us to equate power—just like those long-ago disciples did—with nationalism and military muscle.

But over and above the din of the rattling sabers of all the empires of this world, we hear and we remember the words of an angel to shepherds on a hillside: *To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.* The angel's announcement conveys an underlying message: There can be only one Lord. And it is not Caesar, who lays claim to that title.

Then we hear and remember Jesus' words to Pilate and to us: *You have no power not given to you from above.*

You have no power not given to you from above. When we accept and confess this truth and integrate it into the center of our being, everything else falls into place. We don't have to juggle—or struggle—any more. We don't have to try to do it all on our own anymore—once we acknowledge the one Source of

all true power. Ephesians reminds us of *the immeasurable greatness of [God's] power for us who believe.*

And on this Ascension Sunday, a share in this ultimate power is promised by Jesus himself. Promised to believers about to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. A gift that has no price. A gift that can't be purchased. A gift that can't be earned.

Beloved, the Spirit of God is a free gift. A gift that empowers. This gift of Spirit power is received—received by a band of stumbling, uncomprehending Galileans. Who are transformed—by this gift of Spirit power—into bold, courageous apostles. Apostles who are sent out to spread the good news about Jesus Christ. Apostles who dare to bear witness to their faith—in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

As the gift of Spirit power transforms them, so too, this promised gift of Spirit power transforms *you!* The gift of Spirit power enables you, too, to be Jesus' witnesses wherever you go. The gift of Spirit power gives you the words you are to speak and the ability to proclaim this One who has ascended. This One who is mightier than anything that would keep him down!

And today, the Holy Spirit offers you a wondrous gift. The presence of the One who lives! Your risen Savior walks with you and talks with you and gladdens your heart. Because he loves you, he uses his power to bring goodness to your life. And he invites you into the kingdom where he reigns exalted *in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and dominion and power, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.*

So rejoice, rejoice, O Christian! Lift up your voice and sing! Jesus the Christ is King!

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