

Acts 1:6-11  
Power to Press On  
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5-31-20

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Today is the day of Pentecost, happy Pentecost, or is it Merry Pentecost? What's the proper greeting? This week I was walking through the greeting card aisle at Kroger and I noticed there weren't any Merry Pentecost cards. I wonder if there are folks out there at home getting up the table or couch to go baste their Pentecost Turkeys? Has anyone maxed out credit cards on Pentecost presents? I suspect not. If there is a holiday that the wider secular society has given complete freedom for the church to celebrate, it's Pentecost. You want to have a holiday for what-now? Go ahead.

That's because the wider world doesn't see the dream God for the world. But then again neither did the disciples when it all began.

When we meet the disciples and the others gathered here in Acts chapter 1 they are standing, starring confused up into the clouds. Jesus had just given his parting words to them, something about receiving power and being witnesses, huh? I can just imagine their confused look, heads cocked to the side like a puppy who has just watched his master walk out the door. They're thinking to themselves, what do we do now? You don't think he meant to leave US in charge did he?

Then their cloud-gazing was interrupted by a couple of angels who say to them: "men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

So the whole bunch—the text says about 120—go back to Jerusalem to the upper room. And because they haven't the slightest clue what to do next. Not knowing what to do they see there is a vacancy in the disciples: "We've got 11 disciples; we can't just have 11, we've got to have 12." So they form a committee. And the text says that Peter and the others bring two candidates for the job opening, Justus and Matthias. They cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles...and he was never heard from again.

About the time they were done with their cloud staring and bureaucracy it says a mighty rush of VIOLENT wind blasted through the place where they were all staying and something like fire descended down upon them. And in an instant men and women were speaking languages they didn't know 5 minutes ago.

When this happens they're no longer looking up, now are looking out at one another in amazement. Do you believe this? Do you know what just happened? No, do you? The Holy Spirit of God, came down and rested upon them and they were given power. But of course in the mix there were those who were astonished by it and sneered at them, saying "They are filled with new wine." Things could have begun to derail at this point, but Peter gets up, and notice he doesn't say "we're spiritual people, we don't drink wine." No he looks at his watch and says it's 9 o'clock in the morning, it's a little early.

Now when the disciples and the 120 others had calmed down a bit, after seeing this miraculous event, they remembered what Jesus said to them, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” 22 And 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 withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”**

New Testament Professor and Commentator Dale Bruner (someone who I have utmost respect for and whose study on the Sermon on the Mount our Sunday School class has used) is a wonderful teacher of biblical stories. He is retired now but years ago part of Dale’s teachings usually included dramatic re-enactments of the stories at hand—which usually were followed by a laugh. At this point in John 20 when he reaches a certain part in the story’s re-telling only to reach into his pocket and then pull out a little aerosol can of breath freshener. After giving his mouth a couple squirts, he then goes around the room exhaling into everyone’s faces as he re-enacts Jesus’ breathing out of the Holy Spirit onto the disciples! (Wondering Question: Will our resurrection bodies be capable of halitosis? Perhaps not. And even now: someday it may be safe to breathe on each other again too!)

This is in some ways John’s version of Pentecost and it is indeed noteworthy to see Jesus literally exhaling the Spirit onto the disciples.

In our life of faith so often we are after capturing moments and preserving them forever, it’s why we love to memorialize people and moments. And Pentecost, like so many other experiences of signs and wonders is a moment the followers of Jesus are tempted to memorialize.

But once you get past the initial ecstasy of the event you realize what a terrifying event Pentecost really was—forgive sins? Be my witnesses?

Author and Pastor Craig Barnes puts it this way: “When Jesus was born, we were delighted because God is with us. When Jesus conducted his ministry, we were taught and challenged to be followers. When he died on the cross, we were overcome with God’s love for us. When he rose from the dead, we were surprised by the hope of eternal life. But when Jesus ascended into heaven, like the first disciples we are terrified to discover that he calls us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. And then at Pentecost, we discover that the Spirit actually gives us the power to do this.”

There have been times in history, both recent and more distant where this call to forgive sins in the power of the Holy Spirit is unthinkable difficult. Now is no different. Again this week we received unthinkable news. Another black man murdered in the streets. And I don’t know about you, but in the past the emotion I experienced most acutely was sadness. This time it’s sadness mixed with quite a bit of anger.

Jesus, this thing you are asking us to do is so hard, I don’t think we can do what it is you are commanding. But when he breathed on them giving them a preview of what was to come at Pentecost, and then sent the fullness of himself in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that is

precisely what we are commanded to do. As Jesus' people, the Church, somehow we are called upon to do impossible things—with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit gives us the power of Jesus Christ, which is the power to do what is not humanly possible. In the bible you'll notice that no longer are the followers of Jesus referred to as disciples, they are called apostles. The word apostle is the Greek word *apostolos* which means the sent ones, ambassadors. From now on they would have a job to do, to witness.

That's right the savior of the world entrusted the unwritten chapter of God's story to you and me.

I believe that we are standing in the midst of a time of unprecedented need and calling in our community and our world, and God's mechanism, God's answer for the world's need is a church. This is our opportunity to go from a time of memorializing the past to a time of moving into the future, because we continue to live in the midst of the chapter of God's story that is not yet written. As one writer puts it: "we are not the embalmers of the past but the enablers of the present and the empowered people for a new age." At Pentecost followers became apostles, the sent ones, people with a job to do.

The Apostle Paul in Romans 8 says that the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. My goodness how true that is right now. We can almost hear the groaning as we speak. Jesus told his disciples in John 14 that the one who believes in him will do greater works than he did.

And what's your job? Jesus tells his apostles that *you will be my witnesses*. Notice he didn't say you're going to do exactly the same thing I did. He didn't necessarily say that you were going to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and raise people from the dead—that was mostly Jesus' job. What he did say was that we were going to be his witnesses.

What does a witness do? A witness doesn't make something happen. Any courtroom judge will attest that they don't want their witnesses being creative with the story. Just tell the people what happened.

Each and everyone of you has spent the last week carrying out a multitude of everyday things, you changed diapers, you sat in meetings, you visited relatives, you went to the dentist, and took kids to practice. In all honesty that doesn't sound like greater things, but what it does sound like is an opportunity to witness with real people in real situations what the risen Lord Jesus is doing in your life.

That is what a witness does, witnesses don't provide salvation, Jesus still does that. He or she takes notice of what Jesus is doing in the places that will virtually go unnoticed otherwise, but with people like you pointing them out and sharing that grace with others, it's like Spiritual Show and tell. And the great irony is that with lots of little people like you and me doing just that, lives change, communities change, systems change. It's not fanfare, it's faithful.

Perhaps that's what Jesus meant when he said that we would do greater things. Maybe he meant, that through a lifetime of small moments where we point one another back to Jesus, the world can actually change.

In the name of the Father, the son and the Holy Spirit.