

PENTECOST - Power to Proclaim

[Acts 2:1-13](#)

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle
Sunday, May 11, 2008
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

This morning I want to add my affirmation to mothers and fathers, and grandparents and great-grandparents present. God has granted you the freedom and the gift of parenting, to raise children in the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. In some ways, this sermon is dedicated to those who have given their lives, and find themselves at the end of their life, in a place of weak body, but strong heart and soul in Christ.

I also want to call your attention to the unusual tragedy that is going on in Myanmar—the potential of millions, who have not only lost homes and died... but will die without food. I encourage you to not only pray for a change of that government, but to offer special offerings today which we will forward through the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Fund. And if you do so, please mark your check or envelope for that purpose.

Let us pray. Now, Lord Jesus Christ, may, in the power of your Spirit, we hear the word that you speak to us, proclaimed out of the weakness of who you were when you laid down your life and out of the power of God's resurrection. May this Holy Spirit spread among us like wind and fire to transform us as individuals and as a church; in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Sometimes we Presbyterians are known as being a little uptight around the ministry of the Holy Spirit. There was an ecumenical worship service in Washington DC, recently, where a Presbyterian minister was responsible to keep the time of the other speakers that were preaching, and knew full well that some preachers tend to extend their times in the guise that the Spirit is giving them added things to say. And to this, the pastor said, "I'm a Presbyterian and I have no trouble cutting off the Holy Spirit."

Today, the last thing we want to do is cut off the Holy Spirit. But we do affirm that the Holy Spirit brings order in the midst of our chaos; and brings a certain re-ordering which feels like chaos to us, in order to bring us to change. And so the wind and the fire become metaphors for that change. On this historic day of Christian faith, it is all about the impossibility of cutting off God's Spirit—even though we might want to, at times. Because God pours out Spirit upon people who are willing to receive; who are following Jesus Christ and are willing to offer their lives as living sacrifices. On this day when the Holy Spirit came with the power of a tornadic vortex and the powerful manifestation of spreading wild fire, the Apostle Peter quoted the prophet Joel with these words: "In the last days, it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days, I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy."

While each of us, because of God's creation and being created in the image of God, has a certain amount of power, it is only God who can give the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who wields the power of all creation and eternity. Power is the will and the ability to think... to plan... to speak... and to act. Prophecy is the power to proclaim; it is the declaration of God's will... God's gracious presence... the mighty action of God in the world. It is proclaiming God's rule; interpreting God's words and deeds; and revealing God's invisible presence; explaining the very mystery of God present in this time and place. It is proclamation of God's person; of speaking God's voice; and doing God's work where we live. Because God has the power—not only to create the universe, but to re-create all human activity and patterns of life, if we are willing to allow the Holy Spirit to come and to lead us and fill us.

We are made in God's image, with our own powers; but God has given that freedom so that we might choose to align our power in submissiveness, in immersion, to the power of God. God pours out the Holy Spirit upon us—those of us who are willing to follow Jesus and have declared our faith in Christ—to proclaim Jesus' life; his teachings; his suffering; his death and his resurrection. And we are called to proclaim this in the midst of our own human vulnerability and weakness.

I was sitting at the O'Hare Airport recently; a man was on his cell phone and he was seated behind me talking. I try to ignore those conversations because they are none of my business, but I have to have to say, when his head was very close to mine and he's literally talking strongly on the phone, it was hard to ignore what he was saying. I discerned after a just few moments that he was speaking with his daughter; she had been recently through a terrible job loss. She was angry, frustrated; I could hear the anxiety resonating between them. And I could tell from his responses and his assurances that she was extremely upset. He was working hard to calm her down. In a gentle tone and comforting words, he was meeting her fear, anxiety, and her worry with grace and with truth. He spoke love, sanity and wisdom as she let her volatility fly at the other end. There were many moments when he wanted to get up and walk away from the conversation because he had to get on a plane, but he kept being drawn back to her so that he could bring some peace to her soul. He used his power as 'Dad' to proclaim peace into his daughter's mind and heart.

In similar ways to this dad at the airport, we've heard our children early in worship this morning, sing: "...By a gentle touch of healing, a softly spoken word, Moms let us know we're children of the Lord above." Parents have the freedom to speak God's voice and kindness to their children in the midst of their fears and anxieties.

My mother has always been a quiet person, but she has always known how to use the power that she has: the power to proclaim order and goodness in the midst of chaos. When Vida and I were first married, she made it clear to us how she was going to use her power in our relationship: "Gareth, I like Vida a lot. I just want you to know, if you ever have a complaint about her, I intend to take her side." Then, later, off to the side, she quietly turned to Vida and said, "Whatever happens in your marriage, never give up your wheels. Wheels are power. You've got to be able to come and go when you want. Don't ever give up your wheels." Vida still has a great set of wheels today. Today, at 90, my mom has two sets of wheels: they are easy-wheeling walkers that help her to come and go when she wants, around the house. Even with her old and weakening body, she still 'wheels' her power.

As I was growing up, my mother — having a household of a husband, six children, often four to six neighborhood children, one or two relatives, and two to ten cats— would often find herself in the midst of domestic chaos. In those high moments of confusion, her three favorite words were, “Organize, organize, organize!” And she used her power to bring order to disorder. If she sensed things were getting out of control, she would rush into the room, almost like wind and fire, to bring back the order. To make sure she was heard in the urgency of the moment, she would call out our names by going through the whole birth order until she got to the point of the person she really wanted: “Wendell, Wes, Gareth!” And whenever she ended on the name, you knew it was YOUR point. We got the message; things were out of order and she was sweeping in to do the restoration of the mess. She spoke our name—we knew the message was personal and important, if not urgent. If we ignored the message, it was to our peril.

If we ignore the message of the Holy Spirit that is given on the day of Pentecost; if we refuse to acknowledge the power of God in this event, it is to our peril. However, Mom’s greatest power was not in the strength of her personality and gifts – but it was in her willingness to admit her limitations; to live in a humble and gentle perspective about her strengths and her weaknesses.

Unlike human power, the power of the Spirit is a power demonstrated in weakness. This is probably the most difficult point of understanding for us in our American culture —that God will demonstrate and proclaim Jesus Christ in weakness and not in human strength. We are so driven by agendas of human strength that we cannot allow ourselves to come to grips with what Paul calls the “paradox of strength in weakness.”

But the prophet Joel sees God wield this kind of power. There’s a counter-frame to the pattern of the world, with what Joel says about how God is going to pour out his Spirit. Listen to these words from a different perspective. When he names that God will “pour out his Spirit upon all flesh” that includes:

Gentiles—and for a strong Jewish leader, that was considered an ultimate weakness. (How could God speak through a Gentile?)

How could God speak through the weakness of the young? After all, we all know that the young are not mature enough to have something significant enough to say in regard to God.

How could God speak through the weakness of the old? After all, they’re too old to really make much impact... to have much power in leadership... or to call attention to what is to happen in life. How should we respect that kind of power among those who are aging and dying?

The weakness of both sons and daughters. We understand what it means to give such power to sons. But daughters? For the Jewish tradition, this would have been an unspeakable way to think about God’s power.

The weakness of slaves, both male and female? That God would use slaves... not free male Israelites in their strength of life—but God would call slaves to proclaim. Paul took this whole pattern that Joel prophesied about and declared it as a key theological framework for his writing and his life. And in these words, he simplified it to the point, when he heard the words of Jesus in his own life, in his own wrestlings, in his own strugglings, Jesus said: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.”

God’s power is made complete, especially when we are weak. When we are powerless, we have only one option for power and that is the power of God because we have lost our own power. It is often from the weak that the most profound and powerful manifestations of the Gospel are prophesied.

Ned Pendleton has been a long-term member of The National Presbyterian Church. As I speak, he is dying of pancreatic cancer, one moment at a time. He is probably the last living member of the Building Committee that led in the building of this great sanctuary and edifice. He has been a man of power and influence in this congregation for years. I was able to visit Ned just a few days ago in his home. And something astonishingly happened at that moment. While he is succumbing to cancer, in the midst of his weakness, it is very apparent that he is growing in the power of God’s love for him. Even his daughter, whom I spoke with just yesterday, said: “I am envious of my father, who can have such a powerful relationship with God while he’s dying.” As his body becomes powerless, his spirit is becoming more powerful. As each day passes, he is living more fully into the grace and power of God. He is living in the space between this life and the next. And his own illustration is that, while God has taken his hand to draw him into the next life, he’s still holding hands with his wife, Kyoko, and saying “good-bye” to this life.

I went to see him and to minister to him; but astoundingly, he ministered to me. He wanted to tell me how much God loved me. He wanted to assure me that he was O.K. and he wanted to know if I was O.K. as well. I went to give him hope, but he was living in the face of hope, and gave me hope. He was already full of the power of God, and he was pouring out that power toward me. I was humbled by the goodness of his spirit. And while I was with him, I was immersed with a visceral sense of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. In Ned’s presence, I felt like I was on holy ground. And this man is dying; this man is at his weakest place in life.

You see, as the text says at the ending of this event on the day of Pentecost: we can either sneer at God, thinking that faith is for the weak and the sentimental... or we can stand in astonishment of Jesus Christ, who can use anybody in their weakness to deliver the powerful message of God’s love. The Gospel is not about God giving you permission to use your own power for your own purposes. The Gospel is about recognizing the power of God, and setting aside our power trips; repenting of our arrogance; and waiting for the Spirit of God to act, while we are so determined to make God act on our agenda. It is becoming willing to participate in what God will do, rather than to try to get God to do what we want.

The Gospel is not about the power of self-determination... or self-definition... or self-differentiation... or self-assertion. The Gospel is about opening ourselves to what God wants to do with us when we cannot do it for ourselves; and in the midst of that, to proclaim God’s wonderful, powerful grace. Each of us has limited power to assert ourselves as strong human beings. But we have access to an abundant resource—an unlimited resource of power—if we are willing to allow God to take over and to direct us. And we are

particularly open to that when we have come to the end of our own resources. The sense of weakness and powerlessness does not have to be the end of the story because God wants to give us that same Spirit that came on Pentecost: that Spirit who helped Jesus embrace his suffering; who helped him deal with death and to go through it. The Spirit will help you stand in the face of opposition and not be blown away by other peoples' opinions. Frankly, that is not an act of weakness—when we are so quick to give our opinion about what we think God should do and think.

Jesus did not die a strong Messiah; he did not die a hero. He died in infamy as a criminal... a fraud. He died perceived as a weak leader and a failure. He died abandoned by his followers and forsaken by God. Jesus, as a weak person, was rejected by those that knew him. He died powerless according to human measures and expectations. But it is only in Jesus' ultimate sacrifice of laying down his life that the ultimate power of God is given to raise him from the dead. Resurrection only comes through weakness.

We are given some powers. We have... the power to pray; the power to wait; the power to ask for help; the power to be open to God; the power to receive God's gift of grace and faith; the power to confess our sin; the power to admit our weakness; and the power to declare our need for God.

And as the Holy Spirit scholar, James D.G. Dunn says in his book, *Jesus and the Spirit*, "Divine power does not manifest itself by making the believer powerful, but as power in weakness; only so may it be recognized as divine power... Power does not drive out weakness. On the contrary, it only comes to its full strength in and through weakness."

Moms and dads, today, do you feel inadequate to raise your children in this crazy culture? Do you feel weak when it comes to understanding and being wise about all the things to say and do? In your weakness, the Holy Spirit wants to give you power beyond your own ability. Christ's strength can be made perfect in your weakness, if you are willing to invite Jesus to lead you in your life. So let us not proclaim our strengths as human beings. Instead, like the Apostle Paul, let us 'boast in our weaknesses' and the power of God to be made perfect in those weaknesses.

I was fortunate to have a grandmother, when I was growing up, Grandma Nellie, who showed a life of the power of God in weakness. When Vida and I were first married, we had the opportunity to go and be with Grandma Nellie, to sit with her in her aged state... stooped over, barely able to walk... not seeing well. But in her presence, there was this profound sense that she knew God and that God's power was there in her prayers. In her 90's she sat at a little breakfast table and prayed for us. And I can still feel the power of God in that moment where she blessed our marriage. And that is the great demonstration of the power of God in the midst of weakness.

Do not think you have nothing to offer when you are getting older...and you are aging... and you are getting weaker. You are at a prime place in life to provide the flow of God's love and power to the people around you, by how you age and how you die. So let us not sneer at such demonstration of God's power. Let us be amazed, and astounded, and astonished. Let us be perplexed, and wonder, and seek God's loving power because we see it in weakness. Grow old graciously... die weakly, but powerfully...live humbly and vulnerably. For it is the desire and power of God to be perfected in your weakness.

Let us pray. O Lord, we offer ourselves humbly and meekly to be used by the power of your Spirit when we run out of power. May you use the power that we have for good, and may you bring good in our powerlessness, in the power of your Holy Spirit. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, Amen.