

Church of the Crossroads
Second Sunday of Easter
March 30, 2008
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JOHN'S PENTECOST

John 20:19–30

The Gospel lesson read for us this morning has sometimes been referred to as “John’s Pentecost.” The reason is that in the Gospel of John this passage tells the story of the gift of the Holy Spirit being bestowed on Jesus’ disciples following the resurrection.

Usually, we reserve the word “Pentecost” for that Sunday eight weeks after Easter when we hear the story from the Book of Acts describing the day when the Spirit came as wind and fire, settling on each of the disciples. In John’s Gospel, that same gift is given in the story we have just heard. This, then, is John’s Pentecost.

It is a story vividly told. The disciples, following the resurrection, are still caught up in fear, uncertain of the future, and troubled by all the stories of resurrection. Suddenly, the story goes, Jesus somehow moves through locked doors and appears among them. He proclaims his “peace” to them, (twice, in fact) and then he breathes upon them, bestows upon them the Holy Spirit, and brings them to the new life of the resurrection.

This Pentecostal moment in the Gospel of John is characterized by both peace and power. The peace we can appreciate, but the power is something we wonder about. Yet, in the story, the power is unmistakable. Filled with the Spirit, bestowed upon them by Jesus himself, the disciples in the story actually embody the authority of God’s new life, the *same* authority they would naturally have conferred upon Jesus himself, who had said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

The disciples of Jesus are empowered with the authority of Jesus himself. They are given the work of Jesus himself. After he breathed upon them, he said to them. “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (Jn 2:22b–23)

That, my friends, is a lot of authority and a lot of power! Our forgiveness of others is not simply human forgiveness—our forgiveness of others is equated with the forgiveness of God! Imagine that. Conversely, our judgment (that is, the retaining of forgiveness) is not just human judgment—our judgment is equated with God’s own judgment. Incredible as it may seem to us, I do believe it is an accurate interpretation of the story.

Let us place this interpretation in context. It has been said that John’s Gospel is unique among the Gospels in the way it elevates the person of Jesus, who for John is the Christ. John says that he was God’s own Word, with God in the beginning. “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” (Jn 1:3) John goes on to say that the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, “the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” John then goes on, through a series of signs, to describe Jesus as the Light of the Word, the Bread of Life, the Living Water, the Good Shepherd, the Way, the Truth, the Life, and ultimately the Resurrection and the Life. Jesus and God are one, and just before his death, Jesus declares that he and God *and the disciples* are one, the oneness that comes with being friends rather than servants. This oneness between the Father, the Son, and his disciples is so strong that the power of one is conferred to the other. One time, Jesus even says that the disciples would do greater things than he himself! “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” (Jn 14:12) Amazing!

In other words, John’s high view of Jesus translates in a high view of discipleship. All disciples of Jesus share in the same authority God confers upon Jesus.

There is something in this interpretation, however, that we resist. We would just as soon be followers of Jesus, rather than share in the authority of Jesus. We shy away from such responsibility. It’s too dangerous, for one thing. It’s not so much the forgiveness that bothers us. It’s the judgment. Who are we to announce God’s judgment upon others? Upon the world? Who are we to withhold forgiveness?

There is something in us that flees away from the words of Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama’s pastor and former minister of Trinity UCC, when he says “God damn America.” It is not the language we ourselves would use, although we might say the same thing another way. We are not pastors who

have been nurtured and schooled in the language and style of black liberation theology. We might still ask, however: who is Jeremiah Wright to say such things in such a way? Yet, is not Jeremiah Wright a disciple—one upon whom Jesus has conferred authority, not only the authority to forgive, but the authority to judge.

Jeremiah Wright could well be right in his judgment. There, I've said it. May I also say that if we have gotten so accustomed to politicians ending their speeches with "God bless America" that we cannot entertain the possibility that God can also damn America, then we ought to look not only at Jeremiah Wright's language critically, but the language of all those politicians as well. Could it be that that Jeremiah Wright's language hits us as un-American, simply because we are so used to the words "God bless America."

After all, if God could condemn ancient Israel when it fell away from the path of righteousness, cannot God also condemn America when it acts so callously in the world? And would not God's condemnation of America be an expression of God's desire that America change the way it is behaving in the world?

Please do not misunderstand. Jeremiah Wright's language is not the language we might choose, but we do not stand in the prophetic tradition of the African American church. We do stand in the prophetic tradition, however, and as long as we see ourselves involved in that which is judged, as we are involved in this nation, then we too must not hesitate to speak a word of judgment.

Surely, we ought to use the authority that has been conferred upon the disciples of Jesus wisely and humbly. The power that is being described in John's Pentecost is not the power of might, surely. It's the power of love. And that is a different kind of power than the power of might. And yet, love can have its judgmental side. Call it tough love, if you will. Love is not a sentimental acceptance of everything that is. Love can discern that which is of God and that which is not. And love can speak truth, and there is power in that.

Whether we like it or not, John's Pentecost is all about empowerment as well as peace, and not just the empowerment of those first disciples but our empowerment as well.

The story begins with the first disciples and ends with us—we who have not seen and yet who have believed. In the story, it is Thomas who facilitates the transition from those first disciples to us. Thomas, who was absent when Jesus conferred peace and power upon the disciples, represents us in the story. We too were not present, just as Thomas. Thomas had his doubts; so do we—if we are really honest with ourselves. Thomas must see for himself; we wish we could have seen for ourselves. Yet, when Thomas is invited to put his finger on the wounded hand of Jesus and place his hand on the wounded side of Jesus, he does not. The story says, simply, that he believes and exclaims, “My Lord and my God.” Thomas is finally blessed, the one who was invited to see and touch. But even more blessed are we who have not seen and yet have come to believe. We are brought into the picture. We receive the gift of the Holy Spirit just as those first disciples. We are given the peace of Jesus and also his power.

I trust that we will not be so timid as to not use the peace and power that we have been given—not the power of might, but the power of forgiveness and the power of judgment within the context of love. We must always be ready to forgive as God forgives, and also to speak the truth in love, and act upon it, even when that truth involves a judgment upon the nation of which we are a part. The Gospel empowers us so to do. May we receive both grace and courage to use the gift God has given us as disciples of the One who was dead and is now alive among us, even as we use it wisely, yet boldly. So may it be. Amen.