

Pat Conover: Power and Forgiveness

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Power and Forgiveness

I am pleased to have the opportunity to preach a Pentecost sermon for you. [Over a year ago](#), I preached about Luke's understanding of the resurrection and said that it was not the climax of Luke's story, that Luke saw Pentecost as the climax of his story. It is so easy to forget that the book we call the Acts of the Apostles, is the second half of the Gospel of Luke.

At the end of the Gospel of Luke, the writer has Jesus say, "I am sending on you the gift promised by my father; wait here in this city until you are armed with power from above." Then Jesus blessed his disciples and left them. They returned to Jerusalem and spent their time praying in the temple.

Luke begins Acts by reminding the reader that Jesus had directed the disciples not to leave Jerusalem, not to disperse, but to stay together. He recalls that Jesus said, "You must wait for the promised gift from the Father, of which I told you. John, as you know, baptized with water, but within the next few days you will be baptized with the spirit." That is the lectionary story we have for today.

Hear verse 4 of that story again.

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance.

Most Seekers have not had personal experience with speaking in tongues. Furthermore, we associate the practice of speaking in tongues with contemporary Pentecostals, and we are likely to have a culturally based opposition to the Pentecostal movement, to be unhappy with their theology even though we mostly do not know what that theology is. I was baptized as a Presbyterian and I remember being warned against the Pentecostals. I was told they were out-of-control and that glossolalia is not one of the higher gifts. They liked quoting Paul who was not very fond of speaking in tongues. Paul thought it was disruptive to worship and tried to bind it with liturgical rules. So I promptly went to a little backwoods Pentecostal Church I knew about in Leon County, and though I found the service unusual, I thought then and now that the marks of authenticity and spirituality were visible and present. I sang with them and am sorry now that I was not then ready to find another tongue for all that I was carrying at that time.

I do not mention the clinical sounding term glossolalia lightly. When psychologists hear such things they say, in their clinical jargon, that such a person is out of his or her mind, is crazy. In contrast, I am very attracted to the theoretical and research work of Laing and Esterson, two psychiatrists in England who demonstrated to my satisfaction that the stories of so-called schizophrenics are typically truer in a psychologically important way than the stories of their accusers who forced them into therapy.

The therapy of Laing and Esterson with so-called schizophrenics consisted primarily of staying with them and providing safety and support while they spoke in gibberish, or no words at all, until they were totally emptied and worn out. Then their patients went to sleep and, when they woke up, felt enormously better and were clear-minded and ready to take next steps in putting their lives back together. They speak of such "schizophrenic raving" as natural psychological healing. I have done enough pastoral counseling to agree that when people get beyond words, that it is freeing to make noise without worrying about making sense, to breathe, to "let it all out," to cry, to wail. What is needed is support and safety, rather than interpretation or explanation. I have sometimes encouraged such non-verbal journeys when I knew I had the time to stay with the person that I was caring for. I am concerned that drugs are used to block the expression of such feelings and thus to block natural psychological healing. Healing occurred, sometimes deep and freeing healing, both for Laing and Esterson's patients and in a few people I helped.

Twice as a pastoral counselor, I experienced the kind of power, healing power that Luke is talking about, that I believe is at the heart of what Jesus, and then the disciples, accomplished as healers, by driving out "demons." I am talking about a corollary of the gift of the Holy Spirit, not speaking in tongues but charismatic healing. I'm talking about such a deep clearing of the wellsprings of appreciation, of understanding, of love, and of caring, that there is a momentary and ecstatic bonding between two people that is very healing for the one, and very joyous, and tiring, for the other. At that point, "demons" can be named and called out. I can think of no better language than the Power of the Holy Spirit for describing what I experienced. Then, in my 40s, I was fortunate enough to have the support of someone at a point of enormous stress for me. I broke into laughing and crying,

into crying out. It scared my partner, but did not scare her off. When I was done, I slept and in the morning, I felt a wonderful sense of clarity and readiness to get on with my life.

I tell you this story because I want to beg you to open your heart to an important gospel truth that was critical in the formation of the early church and that I believe can release the Power of the Holy Spirit in Seekers in a fresh way today.

Back to the Pentecost story:

For Luke, the event of Pentecost signals the beginning of the new age that both reclaims the scattered faithful remnant of Israel **and** opens the gospel to the Gentiles. This genius of the unknown writer, conventionally called Luke, takes the gospel an important step further than Mark or Matthew by showing that the good news that the Holy Spirit is already present and available to everyone while fulfilling the promise God had made to the Jews. This was not good news to those Jews who prized the feeling of a special and privileged relationship with God. Nevertheless, for the Jewish disciples and those that followed them, the immediacy, joy and wonder of ecstatic experience swept away the specialness of longing for the specialness of thanksgiving that God had not abandoned them, that God loved them.

Luke is a great writer and Luke-Acts constitutes one-quarter of the length of the New Testament. Luke links the life and death of Jesus to his resurrection as the church, the body of Christ. Luke has learned from Jesus that however bad things

look and feel in the world, the last word remains with God, and that is a loving Word, a healing Word, a powerful Word.

Jesus did not do all his powerful deeds and miracles because he was somehow magically God on earth. Mark, Matthew and Luke are all clear that Jesus received the power of the Holy Spirit after being baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. Now that the disciples have been baptized with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and have the memories of Jesus and his marvelous words and healing actions to guide them, they can do the same things Jesus did. In fact, for Luke, the disciples go on to do even greater works than Jesus had done. If we want to share in the ministry of radical transformation of the world, our highest service to the world, we need to claim not just the gifts and callings of the Holy Spirit, but also the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do not misunderstand me. I am clear that Luke understand Jesus as the Divine Presence among his followers, but there is no magic to this understanding. In fact, a close reading of Luke will indicate that Luke really did not like some of the intimations of magic in Mark. He cut them out when he used Mark's stories.

One of the impacts of the Power of the Holy Spirit is to create spiritual unity across all human barriers and divisions. Such unity is a dominant theme in Acts. The story of Pentecost is a story of the beginning of the church. The speaking in tongues drew in Jews from everywhere in the known world. Jews who could not talk to each other in their native languages could nonetheless join in the transforming experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit in what Peter and the other disciples were about. Thousands were baptized

according to Luke and history shows that indeed an evangelistic force was released that led to a rapid growth of Christianity despite the limited nature of the original disciples and against enormous barriers and then persecution by those around them.

Are you feeling a little excitement welling up in you just to contemplate this? Does it feel a little strange and scary?
[Pause]

The visiting Jews who were present to the Pentecost experience were amazed and perplexed. Some said to each other, "What can this mean?" I hope you will join them in this question and not stand on the sidelines with the others who said the disciples were drunk.

Luke has Peter say that the disciples were not drunk. Then Peter quotes from the prophet Joel to give his hearers some context for understanding what is happening.

"In the last days," says God, "I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. Yes, on my servants and my handmaids I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they shall prophesy."

There is a lot in this quotation. It links the power of eschatological hope to the experience of the disciples. It points to shared leadership. Young and old, men and women, all can receive this Spirit and it will lead them all to prophesy. It lures us to value the understandings that come with an ecstatic connection to God. Such understanding comes with the clarity that is left when one has emptied one's heart and soul

of all the pain, all the anger, all the confusion, all the resentment, that comes with being mistreated, unappreciated, misunderstood. It comes from opening up one's deepest hungers, beyond words, to all in the congregation. It comes from a community built on the trust that everyone shares such hungers and that we can hold each other, care for each other, beyond our capacity to understand and explain. Moreover, it comes from the experience of forgiveness. At such moments, all we can do is care for each other and hang in with each other. Then, in the morning, we can take positive steps in working things out. In the morning, we can look at Deborah's pictures that come from a place beyond words. We can more deeply trust the silence in our daily prayers. We can enter deep bonding love when we share sexually. We can sweep our sidewalks and feel the connection to the world at our doorstep.

Speaking in tongues is a great leveler of persons. We are all equal in our dependence on God. For Luke, the gift of the Spirit led the disciples to a sharing of possessions as one of the first marks that people had truly claimed the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Yet one more key to understanding the Power of the Holy Spirit is needed. I am talking about forgiveness.

When John the Baptist proclaimed baptism for the remission of sins, a once-and-for-all forgiveness of sins, he set loose a spiritual and psychological truth that also had profound and desperately radical implications for the religious and political powers that ruled in Jerusalem and Galilee. Remember that the Romans had chosen to rule Israel through quisling kings and high priests who bought their positions from Rome and owed their power to Rome.

Jerusalem was important to Jews for their historical memories and because of the temple. As I have said before, it is hard for us to appreciate the scale and grandeur of the temple. Just one of the temple buildings was then the biggest building in the world. Ten thousand workers at a time were engaged in the construction of the temple. It was the focus of pilgrimage for the seven million Jews living in diaspora in Egypt and all around the Mediterranean.

The focal activity of the temple was animal sacrifice for the propitiation of God, so that God would overlook (not forgive) the sins of individuals and the collective sins of the people Israel. At that time, many religious cults engaged in animal sacrifice to propitiate God, but none with the scale and grandeur that the Jews practiced in the temple. Such religious practice was not threatening to Rome because so many Greek and Roman and Egyptian gods were understood as calling for propitiation through animal sacrifice.

Baptism for the forgiveness of sins meant the end of a religion based on propitiation of God through animal sacrifice, and for that matter through other kinds of sacrifice or tithing. John, and then Jesus, preached a God who loved the people Israel, who kept the covenant despite the disobedience of the people, and who made salvation the acceptance of acceptance. John's baptism was proclaimed before the later Christian theology of atonement and it is more existentially basic.

John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins though that is often lost in contemporary liturgies of baptism. For those

Christians who wanted to make Jesus pure and perfect, it was an embarrassment that Jesus needed forgiveness. In any case, forgiveness is not possible without true confession; it is merely waiting. Moreover, true confession necessarily includes repentance, a turning. In that turning the channels of grace are opened and power for healing and service come. A hunger, a desire, for healing and service come.

For the early Jewish followers of Jesus, followers who were raised on Torah, their psychological worldview was dominated by inescapable guilt because it was hard to keep the law. The prophetic tradition they cherished repeatedly told them they were being collectively punished for their collective sins and the sins of their ancestors. In addition, for those who were too poor to keep the ritual laws of kosher there was shame on top of poverty. It is no wonder that so many disciples and followers of Jesus and John were poor. Here was escape from the crushing psychological burden of guilt and shame.

No wonder John and Jesus were killed. They were a fundamental threat to the power of the quisling kings and priests in Jerusalem. Free forgiveness is not good news to those who make a living parceling it out.

We, however, do not live in a culture focused on guilt and shame. Furthermore, those of us in Seekers mostly have a decidedly oppositional feeling about the fundamentalist preachers who go around trying to get us to feel guilty so that they can rush in with their formula of salvation. We are also oppositional about the manipulative and ritualized approach of Roman Catholics to confession, penance and absolution, with the powers of forgiveness in the hands of a hierarchy that has repeatedly shown over the centuries that

they have a limited understanding of Christian ethics and moral duty.

We practice confession and absolution as part of our Sunday liturgy. I find it a very important part of our liturgy. Still, I do not see in Seekers a lot of emphasis on feeling of guilt or shame. They are not primary categories in our conversation. We like creativity and calling better than repentance.

Like many of you, I find the understanding of sin I grew up with rather silly and boring. I was taught that I should not want to do bad things to other people. I seldom wanted to do bad things to other people and I came to realize that very few people I knew wanted to hurt others; even those I deeply oppose on political grounds mostly believe they are doing right things that are good for people.

There are more sophisticated understandings of guilt that do convict us. How do we rationalize and shut our eyes to the impacts of our choices and actions however well intentioned? How do we feel about the fact that out of moral commitments and best choices, our reform efforts and our service, even our charity, often does harm as well as good? How do we feel about our enormous unearned privileges? Is confession of these kinds of sin an important part of our inner journey as a community?

Asked a different way, for what do we need to be forgiven? What and who do we need to forgive for the hurts we have received? I have a particular path in the arenas of guilt and shame as a transgender person and I invite you to identify

what your particular paths are as well. Moreover, what do we need forgiveness for as a Christian community? David has recently and appropriately challenged us about feelings of liturgical superiority and denigration of the worship styles of others.

How can we sustain an appreciation of what God is doing in judgment in the world without generating a feeling of superiority because we are not like Them? I am talking about "Them" with a capital T. When Them with a capital T are around, we are in danger of claiming a special and privileged relationship with God.

What if we really felt a deep need for forgiveness by God, not just for rare sins of wanting to hurt others, but also for our inescapable involvement in sin when we buy our groceries, claim our paychecks, choose ourselves, choose our families and choose our community first in the ways that we use our resources of money, time and caring. If you can imagine the depth of that challenge then you can imagine the depth of hunger that makes the healing and salvational power of the Holy Spirit so precious.

Luke is clear in the beginning of Acts. The eschatological time, the End of Days, is already upon us. The powers and principalities that ruled the old times have been defeated, decisively and completely defeated, for the last time. Killing Jesus showed how empty their power was and how empty it is. You can kill Jesus and we ourselves will die, but the Holy Spirit is eternal. The Word will never pass away.

To help get outside of the distracting imagery of the apocalyptic writing in the Hebrew Scripture, gospels, Paul,

and Revelation, you may be more comfortable with the word kairos, which may be roughly translated as the fullness of time. It is the time when new possibility is opened because one moment, one age, is drawing to a close and another is opening. When the radical edge of the church in South Africa saw the transformative potential that came to their nation with the ending of apartheid, they wrote a guidance document that they called their Kairos Document. It called for confession, for repentance, and offered a radical critique of their culture and society.

What are our kairos moments? What do we need to see with the clarity that comes from emptying ourselves of guilt and shame, of consumerism and pride, of dependence on privilege, on the fear of meaninglessness and death, and of the burdens of confusion, namelessness and alienation? It is nice to name all the "evil spirits" we have to contend with, to call the evil spirits out of each other as Jesus did. It is sometimes even better to cry out beyond our words and our understanding, to stand spiritually naked as we share in the silence and in all our noises that come from places beyond words.

Let us hold this moment and each other with great tenderness so that the Living Christ may have his and her way with us.