

ASCENSION SUNDAY (Easter 7) SERMON for May 29, 2022 at Grace
TEXT: Acts 1:1-14 by Rev. Jim Hill
TITLE: "Power Supply"

The latest massacre of innocent children in the U.S. on Tuesday has left a lot of Americans are feeling helpless and hopeless. One American commentator said: "It is as if the nation is having a nervous breakdown."

U.S. citizens may be feeling powerless, but the truth is, they still have the power to vote into office governors and senators who will tighten the gun-laws. I'm hoping and praying U.S citizens will take out their anger and frustration over these killings at the polls this November.

Sad to say, there seem to be a lot of citizens in both the U.S. and Canada who think: "It doesn't matter who I vote for. The people in power seem to do as they please anyway, so why should I bother to vote?" That's the devil's lie. What Edmund Burke once said, is true, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."

I remember a cartoon I saw years ago, showing a crowd of individuals. Above each person's head was a "thought cloud" and each person had the same thought: "What can one person do? What can one person do? What can one person do?" Individuals often think they are powerless, but often forget the great power that comes from acting as a group.

In past history, the males in society generally had a lot more power than females, but, thank God, that's been changing in recent years. In many countries, women are feeling more empowered, while a lot of men are feeling powerless. Sad to say, some men are blaming that on women rather than on the true causes of their feelings of powerlessness.

We all have a great deal of power that God has given us: to bear and raise children; make music and art; to design and construct; to plan and to invent; to farm and raise plants and

animals. We have the power to tear down or build up; to create or destroy; to choose war or peace; and so on.

But all this power tends to “go to our heads”, and we fail to realize that in many areas of our life, we are powerless. People like us, who richer and more powerful than most people in the world, often fail to realize how powerless we really are. For instance, none of us has power over other people unless those other people grant us power over them. It’s a difficult lesson of life that many people fail to learn. Yes, we can coerce people, but only for so long, and they rebel or leave us.

We do have some power over our children and how they live their lives, at least up until their teens. But our strongest power over our children is the power of example! Yet many parents don’t seem to realize this!

I venture to say that the most common marriage problem, the one that leads to divorce more than anything else, is when one partner is determined to exercise power and control over the other, as if they were a parent and their partner were a child. This was first described and publicized by psychiatrist Eric Berne in his 1964 book “Games People Play”.

Yes, we have a great deal of power that God has given us. This is expressed vividly in Psalm 82, where the Psalmist writes, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals and fall like any prince” because you do not “rescue the weak and the needy and deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” In other words God is saying to us, “You are capable of this; this is within your power.”

On the other hand, we human beings cling to the illusion that we have power when we don’t actually have it. All it takes is for us to become addicted to something and attempt to give up that up by sheer will-power. It’s a very humbling experience when we fail at giving up something that harms us!

I've sure we've all had the experience of failing to make the changes in our lives that we want to make. Perhaps we try to pray more or to exercise more or to eat less. It's a humbling experience if we find that our best efforts are ineffective! I'm reminded of Sisyphus, the character in Greek mythology who expended all his effort to roll a huge boulder most of the way up a hill, only to get so tired he couldn't push any more, and sadly watched as it rolled right back down again. And he kept repeating it with the same negative result.

Life is like that sometimes. But God is at work in our lives, waiting for us to reach the point where we admit that we are powerless to solve a particular problem. That's actually Step 1 of the 12-step program. And that first Step is the most difficult of all the 12 Steps. But once we "give up" and admit that we are powerless over alcohol or whatever other thing has a hold over us, then God can step in and help us.

So, God allows us to experience weakness and powerlessness, so we will feel the need for our Higher Power, our Creator's help.

But let's not wait until we are at our wit's end. Let us pray daily for forgiveness for our sin of trying to "go it alone". Let's not hesitate to pray to receive God's Holy Spirit within us, again and again and again. For this is where spiritual power lies. It is God's Holy Spirit within us that gives us

the power to follow Christ;
the power to love one another;
the power to live a productive life,

and the power to fulfill our calling in life, which is to bear witness to Christ, in word and in deed.

I'll say more about "witnessing" in a moment. But let me say a bit more about the Holy Spirit.

The book of Acts, in the New Testament, is called the "Acts of the Apostles". But a better title would be: "The Acts of the Holy Spirit working through the Apostles."

Luke, the writer of Acts, mentions the Holy Spirit over and over and over again in this New Testament book – 3 times in the first eight verses alone! The Holy Spirit of God is the main character in this history book of Acts, because the Spirit was the power behind everything the apostles did.

Our text from Acts chapter one mentions the names of several disciples who were present for Jesus' Ascension, and women also who were disciples of Christ. For three years they had been disciples (which literally means "students"), and now Jesus was calling them to be apostles (which literally means "the sent ones"). They were embarking on a vocation, a life's work which they were powerless to undertake. Most of them were illiterate, uneducated, poor, low class, subsistence labourers. Some were outlaws, revolutionaries and zealots wanted by the Roman authorities.

Luke reports that after Jesus died, these disciples were hiding in Jerusalem, fearful of being arrested for being Jesus' associates. But then Jesus appeared among them, resurrected, and he said to them, "Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. But do not fear; I will be with you. I will put my Holy Spirit into your hearts, and give you the power to forgive and retain sins, the power to heal the sick and cast out demons, the power to preach and teach in the synagogues and even in front of great crowds!"

That last kind of power (the ability to speak in front of great crowds) reminds me of when I was in high school. I was terrified of speaking even in front of a small classroom of fellow students! But the Holy Spirit helped me overcome that disability. By the time I got to college I became able to do what I never thought I would be able to do: speak in front of a large crowd. I was asked to act in a play as one of the two main characters, and had to memorize a lot of lines to say on stage. When the evening came,

the auditorium was packed (maybe 7 or 8 hundred people. And I did very well! No one was more amazed than I was, that I did so well.

My point is: God can help us as God helped those first disciples: God is ready to give us the power and the capability we need, to do the tasks God calls us to do.

Notice in today's Reading from Acts, that the disciples were expecting Jesus the Christ to bring about his kingdom on earth all by himself. The disciples knew that God had the power to do this, because they had been travelling with and observing this Son of God for three years, watching him exercise power and demonstrating the presence of God's kingdom among them, through amazing healings and signs and wonders. And they were overjoyed, because the Kingdom of God on earth was something that the Jewish nation had been looking forward to, for a thousand years, since the time of King David!

"Now," they thought. "Now, finally, through the Messiah/Christ, God is going to change history in a direct and dramatic way. Jesus was going to bring about what the prophets had long foretold, the so-called "Day of the Lord", when the peace and sovereignty of Yahweh would cover the earth, and Jerusalem would be the capital city of this everlasting, divine kingdom.

That dream and hope is contained even in our Lord's prayer, where Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as in heaven."

So it was natural that the disciples should ask the resurrected Jesus: "Lord, will you now, at this time, restore the kingdom to Israel?"

But Jesus replied (if I may paraphrase): "The 'when' is not yours to know. It's going to come in the indefinite future. I can't say how, except that 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' "

So, God wasn't going to do this alone! God was calling them to participate, to giving them the privilege of working together to bring about the coming of God's kingdom on earth. Christ was enlisting that motley crew of disciples to be partners in ministry with him. So, as Jesus ascended and left the earth, lifting up his hands and blessing them, he was commissioning them to complete God's work of spreading the kingdom to the ends of the earth.

It's almost comical, that as they were gazing up into heaven, two angels appeared and said, "Why are you standing around gawking with open mouths? You have work to do! And when you have completed your work, then Jesus will return from heaven, in a way that will be just as dramatic and glorious as you have seen him go into heaven."

So they went to work, and accomplished amazing things by the power of God's Holy Spirit. After them came their descendants and converts who also went to work, continuing to evangelize and plant congregations, spreading the love of Christ and spreading the Kingdom of God in ever-extending, concentric circles from Jerusalem, throughout the whole world. You and I have been called to continue that work in our day and age, because it's still incomplete. We know that, because Christ hasn't returned yet.

It's as if Jesus never dropped his hands, and is still promising to send his Holy Spirit upon us, so we may witness to God's goodness and love in our own day. We too are commissioned, like the apostles, to bear witness to Christ by our words and by our deeds.

I want to emphasize that Jesus does not want us to go door-to-door like the Jehovah's Witnesses. St. Paul said, "We don't peddle the Gospel." We don't sell it, because that's insincere and dishonest. Some people think that that's being "evangelical", but it's actually anti-evangelical.

To verbally bear witness to our faith means simply to speak of what we have seen regarding God's goodness in our own lives, and not being afraid to talk about the grace and goodness of God. What we call the "spoken witness" is simply to be honest about what God has done for us.

But words don't have as much effect as deeds, especially nowadays when bombarded with words, words, and more words. I think that the best way to bear witness to Christ in our time in history is to demonstrate the love of Christ: Let people see Christ in the way you live your life.

In 1871, the explorer Henry M. Stanley came across a doctor working in central Africa, named David Livingstone, and Stanley spent some time with Dr. Livingstone, who was not only a physician, but also a missionary and explorer. Afterward, Stanley wrote: "If I had been with him any longer I would have been compelled to be a Christian, [yet] he never spoke to me about it at all." It was the sheer weight of the witness of this man's life that was irresistible.

In any case, the call of Christ to us is clear. Christ's command to follow him doesn't mean we have to do everything exactly as Jesus did; but it does mean that we should speak and do good in the way he would do it if he were in our context, in our shoes, in our time and place. All we need is the power to do what Christ has called us to do.

May God grant us Christ's Holy Spirit, to guide and strengthen us in our mission.

Amen.