

Sermon, the Feast of Pentecost
 May 11, 2008
 St. John's Episcopal Church
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Power to Forgive

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it fill the entire house where they were sitting. ...

Acts 2:1

When it was the evening of the day of Resurrection, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and 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."

John 20:19-23

Spiritual power is an amazing thing. Spiritual power—the Holy Spirit's power—is like wind blowing through us and fire burning in us, giving us resilience and courage, capacities for mercy and forgiveness, passion and understanding that can take our breath away. It's what makes us *more* of who we are. I know you've felt it—it's a power that comes through you. You feel it, and you can use it for good, but it isn't yours. St. Paul describes it as power "at work in us, able to accomplish far more than we can ask for or imagine." (Ephesians 3:20)

The Spirit's power comes upon us in a variety of ways. You're in conversation with someone who is going through a difficult time, or maybe you're the one who is struggling and you're in conversation with someone else about it. And in the middle of what was otherwise an ordinary conversation, something happens. One of you speaks, and it is *exactly* what the other person needs to hear, so much so that years later you can remember was said, word for word. You wonder "How did he know?" Or someone asks you, "How did you know?" "I didn't know," you answer. You may not even remember what you said. That's the Spirit at work in you.

Or maybe you're in the middle of something that is taxing you to the last ounce of your strength. You're exhausted and want nothing more to stop whatever it is you're doing and need to continue doing for the foreseeable future. As one of my teacher's used to say, "When you're dancing with a gorilla, you don't stop when you're tired." If it were up to you alone, though, you would stop. But by the grace of power from another source you continue. You just keep going. "How do you it?" others ask. "I have no idea," you reply, and you don't, because it's not your strength that you're working off of anymore." It's the Spirit at work in you.

Maybe the power comes through forgiveness. You find yourself, as we all do, struggling to forgive someone or to accept forgiveness for yourself. It's hard work, letting go of past suffering and betrayal; it's hard to release the shame and guilt you feel for things you regret. And forgiveness isn't something you can force or fake. But one day, you wake up with a lighter heart. You see someone that you've hurt or who has hurt you and you realize that the pain is gone, or nearly so. Or you go to a movie and find yourself

crying your eyes out for characters on the screen, and as you leave the theatre, some of the burden you carried in with you stays behind when you leave. It wasn't as if you weren't working at forgiveness. If you're like me, you have to work at it all the time. But when forgiveness comes, it feels like a gift nonetheless because you could never accomplish it on your own. Forgiveness is the Spirit's work.

Often other people want to compliment you, or thank you, for the spiritual power that you were blessed to have blow through you. Your first response is to say, in all honesty, *it wasn't me*. Oh, your friends beam back at you, and you're modest, too. But it's not modesty. It's simply an acknowledgment that what others experience as a gift through you was a gift *for* you, too. It was a gift. The Rev. Ward Bauman from the House of Prayer, speaking at a clergy conference that I attended this week, quoted a Peruvian poet: "I am a hole in the flute that the Christ breath moves through." That's what it's like. We feel the breath blowing through us, but it isn't ours. It's mingled with our breath, and we have a part in its extension out to others, but it isn't ours.

The other humbling realization about the Spirit's power working in us is that *it doesn't last*. We can't hang on it. In my yoga class, the teachers say, "Some days you're a rock star, and other days you're not." In other words, on some days when practicing yoga, or anything else, for that matter, your body feels strong, balanced, and calm. On other days, you can barely stay in the room. The Spirit's power is like that, too. When we don't have it, we don't. We speak and others yawn. We work to the point of exhaustion and then collapse. We try to forgive and only bitterness and resentment spew from our mouths. So when Spirit's power changes all that, even for a moment, we know it for the gift that it is.

One of the most important spiritual decisions we make, then, is how we choose to live in relationship to the Spirit's power. This isn't a decision that we make once, but continually, every day. For everything I've said thus far, and all that the Scriptures teach us about the Spirit resting upon the disciples and Jesus breathing his Spirit upon them, could lead to the mistaken, and tragic, assumption that receiving the Spirit is a passive enterprise, that there's nothing for us to do except wait until the power comes, and if it doesn't then we're off the hook. It is true that the Spirit comes as a gift of power and grace, but our receptiveness to the Spirit is something we can and must cultivate. Even when we don't feel the wind in our sails, there is much we can do to practice the skills and capacities that the Spirit can draw upon from within us. We decide, everyday, as Bill Peterson said in a Sunday Forum recently, what we give God to work with.

By way of analogy, think of what is required of us when cultivating a skill or artistic expression. While some people are endowed with greater gifts than others—as St. Paul said, there are a variety of gifts—those who are given greater gifts, that is to say, more to work with, still must work to develop the gifts they've been given. Indeed, they typically work a lot harder than the rest of us in their giftedness. Whenever you catch yourself thinking that another person's gift must come easily to him or her, remember that there are hours and hours of practice behind everything that seems effortless to us. In the practice of our skill or art, there is another power, another source of grace at work, but when the Spirit's power isn't available to us, it doesn't mean that we sit in a corner and do nothing. We keep practicing. We show up and do our part. If nothing more happens, so be it. If the Spirit chooses to work in a particularly powerful way through us, then we will be ready with the best of what we can give from our side.

I'd like to spend the remainder of my time focusing on one specific arena in which the Spirit works within all of us, and one for which we all have a particular and urgent responsibility to cultivate as best we can: the gift and the work of forgiveness. I dwell on forgiveness because, in terms of its impact for good in the world, it may be the most important spiritual gift for us to receive and discipline to practice. It is also the first charge that Jesus gave to his disciples after the resurrection: "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus said to them. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Do you hear the responsibility Jesus entrusts to them, and by extension, to us? Jesus has given us the authority to forgive and to withhold forgiveness. How do we use that power?

I've been reading a small book on forgiveness by the Buddhist writer Jack Kornfield, entitled, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*.¹ In it are simple and compelling truths about the power of forgiveness, and how urgently we need it. As I read just of them, allow your mind to travel to wherever it is that you need to receive or extend forgiveness:

- He begins by quoting the Buddha: "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law."²
- "Forgiveness is the necessary ground for any healing. It is hard to imagine a world without forgiveness. Without forgiveness life would be unbearable. Without forgiveness our lives are chained, forced to carry the sufferings of the past and repeat them with no release."³
- "Forgiveness does not happen quickly. For great injustice, coming to forgiveness may include a long process of grief, outrage, sadness, loss and pain. True forgiveness does not paper over what has happened in a superficial way. It is not a misguided effort to suppress or ignore pain. It cannot be hurried. It is a deep process repeated over and over in our heart which honors the grief, and in its own time ripens into the freedom to truly forgive."⁴
- Quoting Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should see sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."⁵
- "Finding a way to extend forgiveness to ourselves is one of our most essential tasks. Just as others have been caught in suffering, so have we. If we look honestly at our life, we can see the sorrows and pain that have led to our own wrongdoing. In this we can finally extend forgiveness to ourselves; we can hold the pain we have caused with compassion. Without such mercy, we will live our own life in exile."⁶

¹ Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace* (New York: Bantam Books, 2004).

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 21.

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁶ Ibid., 33.

If you are struggling to forgive someone, or to forgive yourself for things that you regret, take comfort that forgiveness is the hardest life task we are given, and it is one at which we often fail when left to our own resources. But remember, too, that forgiveness is also the Spirit's gift—blowing through and among us, making possible far more than we can ask for or imagine. Forgiveness is a gift, and like all gifts, we must be open to receive it, by cultivating in our hearts a desire for forgiveness, a longing to be free from the burdens of the past. Without forgiveness, the world is a harsh and dreadful place. Without forgiveness, we cannot heal. Without forgiveness, our very survival as a species on this planet is in peril.

Jesus has entrusted us with the greatest of responsibilities: to be persons of forgiveness and healing in his name. If we forgive, he tells us, others will be forgiven. If we retain their sins—that is to say, if we hold on to them and refuse to forgive—they will be retained, at great cost both to others and to ourselves. But while the work of forgiveness is ours to do, the gift of forgiveness comes to us, and through us, from the Spirit of God. It comes as a gift, in its time, to all who are open to receive.