

It was about a month ago. I was driving back from a meeting in Beatrice and was nearly home. I had just crossed the Platte River on I-80. Then I heard a "bing-bing" sound that alerted me to the flashing signal on my display panel that indicated I was in dire need of refilling my gas tank. I am not sure about you but when a source of power is in question my anxiety level rises. I think that was the case for the disciples when they saw Jesus crucified. He was their source of power. They must have been in a panic as they saw him die.

On Palm Sunday the followers of Jesus felt as if they were part of the most powerful movement possible as Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds. On Friday of that same week they witnessed the crucifixion and the source of their powerful movement was dead. Saturday had to be filled with angst, bewilderment, and shock as the followers of Jesus tried to piece together what had just happened.

Last weekend we noted that on early Easter morning the disciples were not filled with great power. Remember the three C's of the Easter message from the gospel writers? The first "C" was confusion and that doesn't usually co-exist with power. The second "C" was clarity which is needed to discern a path to power. Celebration was the final "C" and it comes to pass when some sense of power is restored. We come to our lesson from Acts this week and in it we find the followers of Jesus, post resurrection, are filled with great power.

I would like to explore this transition from devastation on the Friday of the crucifixion, to confusion on the morning of the resurrection, to the empowered expressed by the followers of Jesus some two months after Easter morning that we find in our lesson. Let's explore this process as we look at the narrative about the first generation church in the book of Acts.

My Eastertide messages, between now and Pentecost Day which is May 20th this year, are going to explore the lessons that our lectionary provides for us out of the book of Acts. The book of Acts, the fifth book in the New Testament was written by Luke. Yes, the same Luke that wrote the gospel about Jesus also wrote this book about some of the happenings in the first generation church. Early on in the book of Acts we hear about the believers in Jerusalem and then the latter portion of the book is about the travels of Paul as he shares the Good News of Jesus Christ in cities located in modern day Turkey, Greece and Italy. Today's lectionary lesson is short, verses 32-35 in the 4th chapter.

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

I am not going to focus upon, investigate, or advocate what we find in three of these four verses. Verses 32, 33 and 35 all have to do with Christian community based upon common possessions. That might have made sense and worked for the initial followers of Jesus in Jerusalem but it is not a model adopted outside of convents and monasteries in the history of Christendom. We certainly have not embraced the common possessions practice in the 84 year history of St. Paul UMC or the 234 year history of the Methodist Church in America.

Verse 33 is left and that is my focus.

³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus...

What imbued the disciples, who were devastated when Jesus was crucified and were initially confused on the morning of his resurrection, with their “great power”?

First, the gospel writers tell us that the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples off and on for forty days before his ascension into heaven. Seeing Jesus for his three years of public ministry, seeing Jesus crucified, seeing Jesus die, and then seeing Jesus resurrected would certainly provide a person with a powerful witness. Repeatedly interacting with the resurrected Christ imbued the disciples with great power as they retold their experience to others.

What imbued the apostles with their “great power”? The second chapter of Acts reports that as the disciples are gathered together in prayer some fifty days after Easter morning that suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. On that day some three thousand people listening to these Spirit filled disciples believed and were baptized. Being filled with the Holy Spirit from heaven which was the experience for the followers of Jesus some 50 days after Easter would provide a person with “great power.”

What imbued the apostles with their “great power”? Their focus remained steadfastly on the resurrected Christ. Their power did not come from their educational attainment, although well trained “grey cells” can be an added asset. Their power did not come from being physically fit, although being in good shape and eating a balanced diet can be plus in life. Their power did not come from big bank accounts or well to do families, although financial stability and good connections can help out. It was their steadfast focus on the resurrected Christ that was the source of their great power.

What is the source of our power as we give testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus?

Well, it is not option #1. We have not seen the resurrected Jesus as the original disciples saw the resurrected Jesus on repeated occasions during those first 40 days after Easter. We are in the wrong place and wrong time to access option #1 for our source of power.

For most of us option #2 has not been our experience. Most of us have never been washed in the Holy Spirit as described in the second chapter of Acts. Upon occasion we might have warm feelings because of God’s presence. We might have a chill run down our spine or stand our hair on end because of the sacred in our midst. But the experience of tongues of fire appearing among us is not common for most of us. The Holy Spirit moves in our midst but usually in a more subtle fashion. Option #2 is available to us but not experienced like was the case for those original disciples by most of us.

I believe option #3 is the most assessable and part of our experience. We find our power to make witness to the resurrected Jesus as we maintain a steadfast focus on Jesus as the basis for our decision making and activities. Steadfastly we can ask ourselves; “What is the Christ spirit in the midst of making this particular decision? or “Is this action or activity I am engaging in, in-line with the spirit of Christ?

When we answer “yes” to those questions then we are in fact steadfastly keeping our hearts in line with Christ and that provides a powerful witness to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

When we give money to help others, donate a coat to keep a child warm, serve meals at a homeless shelter, or work on a mission trip in a far away location we are living in harmony with the spirit of Christ. When we engage in such activities we do maintain a steadfast focus on Christ and provide a powerful witness to the resurrected Jesus for the world to see.

With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus...

The first generation of the church had great power as they gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus because they had repeated interactions with the resurrected Christ for forty days after Easter morning, they were swept over by the power of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day, and they maintained a steadfast focus on Jesus in all their activities.

What is the source of our power? Well, it depends on what needs the power.

In the case of my car when I had just crossed the Platte River on I-80 and the display panel rang out, the power source I needed was gasoline. I am sure the little gas tank icon on my display panel had been flashing for miles but I didn't notice it because the "bing-bing" alarm doesn't sound until the car is running on fumes. I press the button that told me how many miles I could drive before I had no gas and the display panel told me 12 miles. Twelve miles in a Prius let me know I only had about a 1/4 gallon of gas in my tank. I felt a little panic. I was thinking it was 5 to 6 miles to the next exit, the Gretna/Nebraska Crossing Outlet Mall exit. I was hoping my display panel was correct. As I drove the reading went down to 11, 10, 9, 8 miles, and then I hit the hill heading up to the exit and all of the sudden the display went from 7 miles of gas left to 0! I had a mile to go uphill to the exit and was very anxious. I got to the exit, the light was green (Praise the Lord!), I turned right and coasted down the road a few hundred yards to the entrance of the Flying J and rolled up next to a gas pump. Relief, joy, celebration, I had access to power for my car and the rest of my trip home.

What is the source of our power? Well, it depends on what needs the power. As followers of Christ our source of power comes from maintaining a steadfast focus on Jesus in all we decide, do, and declare. Our steadfast focus on Christ provides a powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Amen.