

“Claiming the Power”
Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Peter Shidemantle
7th Sunday of Easter – June 5, 2011
Acts 1:6-14

Do you remember when you first learned to ride a bicycle, the first time on your own? I remember when my dad, running along beside me as I peddled, holding me up on the bike, suddenly released me with a little shove, down the hill in the alley beside our house. I remember that feeling of exhilaration and fear rushing through me at the same time. It was an amazing sense of freedom – almost out of control, but able to hang on just enough, and in the right way, to make it to the bottom without tipping over. I guess my dad was confident enough in my ability to keep my balance, but I wasn't at all sure about it.

That sense of newness, when we experience something for the first time, something we thought we couldn't harness or control, something that was too far above us or too out of reach – when we experience it, it comes with a sense of power. “I can do that. I know what it's like!”

I received power on that summer evening long ago, power over that bicycle, over that hill, power that I would become accustomed to, as most kids do, so that within a short time riding a bike became second nature. As we grow we acquire other skills, simple at first, then more complex. We start to diversify; we discover certain talents or interests, learn how to use them, exercising power over the piece of the world that is given us to affect. The athlete exercises power over her body to move in a certain way, the artist exercises power over the canvass or the clay, the farmer over the land and the elements, the musician over the instrument, the scientist over the data or the material, the lawyer over the law, the philosopher over the ideas, the doctor over the disease. It is the power we have acquired through talent and effort to exercise, hopefully exercise it wisely and well, so that the athlete might win the race, the doctor heal the disease, the musician make beautiful

music, the farmer grow crops, and so on.

In these and many other ways we exercise dominion over the earth, fulfilling the order of creation – humanity’s role in how God intends things to be. It is an awesome responsibility God has given us, as human beings, to use the power we attain for the good care of others and of God’s creation. The book of Genesis tells us that God created the world and all that is in it, called it all “good,” including humanity, and that humanity is called to manage and care for all that is given – as stewards of God’s creation. It takes power to do that; it takes people building, growing, preserving, healing, sharing and helping, thinking and creating. But power is also turned toward grabbing, stealing, tearing down and destroying, killing and abusing. For all the good we have done, all the progress that has been made, humanity has also managed to create quite a mess of things. It seems that we’ve never been really comfortable with power, if you look at the big picture, and yet you have to have it to accomplish anything.

Jesus knew that. If anyone was suspicious of power, it should have been him. Victimized by the powers of his day, by the corruption of the political and religious systems under which he lived, he felt the full force of those powers come down on his head. Standing before Pilate he was a pathetic figure, mocked as a so-called king - king of what? Even his closest followers had run away. His only power was the power of love, and they could see where that got him. With his death they felt completely powerless and afraid. But all of that changed with his resurrection. For forty days after his resurrection, the gospel tells us, Jesus appeared to them, assuring them, telling them about the kingdom of God, telling them that he must leave them again, but in a different way. He wouldn’t leave them alone, but would send the Spirit to be with them and to go with them. “You shall receive power,” he told them, “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.” – stewards of the new creation. And

then he was gone, ascended to the Father, returned to God. Acts tells us they were looking up – watching, as you might watch a helium filled balloon rise higher and higher until it becomes a dot in the sky – when two men in white robes (maybe the same two who were at the empty tomb?) say to them, in what is one of the greatest lines in scripture), “Why are you looking up there?” – the implication being that from now on heaven isn’t the place to look for him, but right here, in the lives of those who receive his power.

Jesus wasn’t just trying to soften the blow of his departure with some assuring words that he would be with them in their thoughts and in their hearts, in the ways that other loved ones remain with us. No, he had to leave, he had told them before, so that they could carry on his work. They’d need power for that. They needed what they didn’t have, what they couldn’t develop on their own through their own talents or abilities – no matter how hard they practiced or how hard they worked. None of us can depend on our own abilities to witness to the good news of the power of life over death, the power of forgiveness of sins, the power of God’s salvation. We can make beautiful music that inspires the soul, we can build majestic buildings and explore the furthest reaches of space, but we can’t muster an ounce of God’s power unless it is given to us and unless we claim it.

You know, when we try to get people to do things around here we tend to ask them in connection with what we know their skills and abilities are – like asking teachers to teach or accountants to serve on the finance committee, lawyers to offer legal advice, and architects to give us building tips. This is wonderful, and we couldn’t get along without the people of God sharing their expertise and the gifts of their talents and means. This is our stewardship, how we minister in the church and in the world. But the power that God gives, the power of the Holy Spirit to “witness to the ends of the earth” goes beyond our abilities and means. I think it’s more like that first bike ride, going with it despite not being

sure about our ability to keep things balanced, almost out of control, sometimes just hanging on – knowing the freedom that fear and exhilaration together can give – risking the fall because the ride is worth it. It is risking rejection because you know you’ve already been accepted. It is bringing the joy in your own heart to places of pain and despair. It’s the kind of power that enables a fisherman to preach the gospel, that empowers accountants to work in the nursery and CEO’s to serve in the soup kitchen and ex-cons to teach Sunday School – that empowers a child to lead us in worship.

Richard Fairchild tells this story:

“Look, I really like you, really like you. You make me feel stuff that few women have made me feel. Let’s stop by my apartment,” he said.

“No, I really don’t think we’re ready for that. After all, we just met. We’ve got to spend a lot more time together before getting that close,” she said.

“Is there anything wrong? Have I said something wrong?” he asked.

“No, it’s just that I’m not going to your apartment,” she said.

“Why?”

“Well . . . “ she said, without really thinking, “well, because I’m a Presbyterian.”

“What’s that” he asked.

“Well, a Presbyterian is a kind of Christian,” she said.

“And what’s that?” he asked.

“A Christian? Well, it’s somebody who believes that some things are right and some things are wrong, that God has plans for each of us and we ought not to violate God’s plans,” she said.

Fairchild continues: “And he, having never had anyone lately say ‘No,’ in a society in which everyone is encouraged to say ‘Yes’; having never met anyone with such self-possession and presence of mind, asked if he could go with her to the Presbyterian place

called ‘church’ sometime. And he did.”

She claimed the power and witnessed to it, in her own way, relative to her own life, in a relationship that was important to her. Thanks be to God.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” There’s always been a lot of disagreement within the Christian community about what that means. Some segments of the church believe you have to show signs of that power by doing certain things, like speaking in tongues, or have certain dramatic, life-changing experiences you can point to that will give witness to the certainty of your own salvation. Others hold a less “enthusiastic” view, believing that their baptism marked the gift of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Martin Luther was so exasperated by the enthusiasts of his day that he said it seemed like they “swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all.”

God gives us a lot of leeway on these kinds of questions, I guess, and surely God must have a sense of humor about it. But none of us would be here if we didn’t believe, or want to believe, or struggle with believing, that the power of God is real and present and given to us – and that we receive it through faith. It is the power to bring love and change, the power to witness to the reality of God’s kingdom and to Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. We should not be afraid of claiming it in our own lives – or better, maybe we should, but claim it anyway. We don’t need to look longingly to the heavens, wondering, let alone predicting, when Christ will return. We are to live in the present and not be overly concerned about things that are in God’s hands. The power of God through the Holy Spirit is present here and now, resting upon you and me. God calls each one of us today to grab hold and hang on.

Amen.