

Faith United Church of Christ Online Worship



The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Ascension Sunday
The Tenth Sunday of Online Worship
May 24, 2020
10:00 a.m.

Power for Uncertain Times

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“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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.” -- Acts 1:7-8

None of us knows how long this is going to last. We don't know how long people are going to feel uncomfortable being around others. We don't know how long government restrictions will remain in place. We don't know how long it'll take the economy to recover and rebuild, with many of us hoping that we will rebuild it along more just and humane lines. We just don't know.

And that's just what Jesus told his disciples would be the case as his earthly appearances to them drew to their close during those forty days between his resurrection and his

ascension. He told them that they wouldn't know what would happen or when. And he told them not to worry about it, because times and periods are God's business. He was echoing Psalm 31, which says that our times are in God's hands. We think our times are in our hands, but Jesus said otherwise. Jesus said we wouldn't know the times or periods that God has set by God's own authority, so we have to learn to live with not knowing. Jesus says that it's our job to be faithfully ignorant about some things.

The thing that those first disciples were hoping for, of course, that now, after his resurrection, Jesus would finally restore the kingdom to Israel. It's hard to know exactly what Luke meant by "the kingdom," and it's even harder to know what the disciples might have meant. The kingdom that David and Solomon presided over would almost certainly have been in their minds, that mythological golden age of peace and security when Israel felt safe within its borders. That was a long time in the past – perhaps a thousand years earlier – but the traditions that had grown up about that time were so powerful that when Jesus broke into people's lives with the signs of God's heavenly realm – his teachings and his miracles – his Jewish contemporaries naturally thought that he was restoring that earlier, earthly realm which they had burnished with myth and legend over the centuries.

That kingdom of David and Solomon represented far more than simply a small piece of real estate. It had become a symbol of independence and self-determination. No more Roman or Greek or Persian or Babylonian or Assyrian or Egyptian oppression. No more back-breaking labor to feed those dining at another king's table. No more burdensome taxation. No more laws being made by Gentiles in Rome or Athens for the Jewish people in the villages of Judea and Galilee. It was all going to be wonderful, the people thought, and they were eager to support any messianic figure who came to town promising to make Israel great again.

And none of it turned out as expected. The people were always disappointed. Messianic figures of one kind or another all tried to use violence to step into the sandals of the righteous leader envisioned by the prophet Isaiah, and still the oppression and heartbreak lingered. No matter how many weapons were stockpiled or how many freedom fighters took the pledge to fight to the death, the outcome was always the same: the haves remained in power and luxury, and the have-nots, just to survive, were forced to support them. There was no real freedom – not for those who labored to keep the system in place, and not for those who struggled to overthrow it. Power politics put everyone in lockdown. It did it then, it continues to do it now, and it always does.

So perhaps you can see why Jesus was such an electrifying figure. He didn't preach or live the politics of power. He lived and preached a different kind of power – spiritual power. He taught, with his life, with his words, and with his signs that true freedom comes for individuals and societies when they place their trust and resources not in human hands but in God's hands. True power, Jesus said, came not from praying for God to get behind our cause or our candidate, but rather from our getting behind God's will and endorsing God's candidate, who is the Holy Spirit: "But 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.”

And that power did come upon those first-century Palestinian Jews and they did become his witnesses to the ends of the earth. How do we know? Because they literally changed the world, that’s how we know. They allowed their lives to be so transformed by God’s Holy Spirit – interpreting for them their experience with Jesus whom they became convinced was the Messiah – that they changed the course of history. Before them, there had been no Christianity, after them there was, and you and I stand in their tradition of trying to change the world for the better by listening to God’s Word in creation, God’s Word made flesh in Jesus the Christ, God’s Word in Scripture, and God’s Word in our hearts and minds. And all of that listening and hearing is made possible by the Holy Spirit.

For the past couple of decades we’ve been hearing much from the chattering classes about how polarized we are as a nation. And we are. It won’t surprise you to hear a preacher say that I believe that polarization is in large measure due to the vacuum that has opened up in our lives as we have become increasingly secular. That vacuum is a spiritual vacuum, and as we all know, nature abhors a vacuum. So we’ve tried to stuff politics into that God-shaped hole and we look to the Democratic party or the Republican party or Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump to save us. We increasingly turn political celebrities into messianic figures, hoping to save ourselves through politics.

And it never works. We lurch from crisis to crisis, election to election, investigation to investigation, scandal to scandal, and nothing fundamentally changes. The structure that gave us our politics won’t be changed by those politics. It was designed not to be.

We change the world when we stop playing the world’s game. We change the world when we stop playing our own game. We change the world when we listen not to the voice of reason, but to the voice of transcendence, which transcends reason and calls us to something even reason can’t figure out.

That’s what the story of Jesus is all about. You can’t figure out his miraculous birth or his even more miraculous rebirth. You can trust the proclamation about them, but you can’t reason your way through them. You either believe Jesus when he said that we find our lives by losing them or you don’t. It’s not a matter of thought, it’s a matter of trust – trust not in the world or even in ourselves, but rather in God. That’s what faith finally comes down to, and that kind of faith comes through the Holy Spirit.

When people allow the Holy Spirit to guide them, their life becomes a beacon for others to show them, by living, far more than by speaking, the truth of righteousness, mercy, and peace that God wills for us and for all creation. A genuinely spiritual life is grounded and secure. It also bears fruit, which Paul listed in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23): love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The person who exhibits those traits, day in and day out, by themselves and with others, in the face of bullying and violence – that person has power, real power. That’s the power that transcends politics and outlasts every kingdom built by human hands. That power is spiritual.

I remember the Sunday Billy Graham came to preach at Harvard. I certainly didn't agree with the political tradition Dr. Graham embraced then and I don't agree with it now, but I didn't take my place in line, along with hundreds of others, to get a seat in a crowded pew in The Memorial Church because of Billy Graham's politics. I stood in line to hear one of the greatest evangelists and preachers of our generation preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and he did. It wasn't his greatest sermon – he was too old and frail by then even to walk up into the pulpit – but the spiritual reality that had called Graham to follow Jesus and to the ministry and which had animated his life for more than eighty years with the power to fill stadiums – that spiritual power was still there. Billy Graham, even in his declining years, could still pack a church in the middle of godless Harvard. That's power and it's spiritual.

I was also privileged to witness the evidence of spiritual power in the middle of godless Harvard about this time of year twenty-four years ago. Oseola McCarty, a washerwoman from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, left her lifetime's savings of about \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi to provide scholarships for needy students. I was in the audience that Thursday morning when Harvard awarded Oseola McCarty an honorary degree. It was commencement, and the open-air Tercentenary Theater was packed with the powerful and the rich and the great and the good. Walter Annenberg, the media tycoon, and Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., also received honorary degrees that day. But when Rick Hunt, the University Marshal, read the citation for Oseola McCarty, explaining why the university had chosen to honor her, the students and their well-wishers became absolutely still. As Rick read out the record of her thoughtfulness, sacrifice, and generosity, attention was riveted on the small, frail, African American woman seated onstage. And when she rose to receive her degree, ten thousand people in Harvard Yard rose with her in a roar of praise and approval. Say what you will about privilege and power and cynicism, but that one gesture proved to me beyond the shadow of a doubt that real power is spiritual power. Oseola McCarty had it, she wielded it on behalf of poor students, and even godless Harvard recognized it.

The power, friends, that will see us through our current crisis is the same power that has seen us through crises before and crises to come. It's spiritual power, and that's the power we need now and in every time of need. Paul says that God wielded that power in raising Jesus from death, which is God's way of showing us that the spiritual power of love is greater than the physical power of death. If God can triumph over death through the spiritual reality of the risen Jesus Christ, God can triumph over any other power that threatens to undo us.

If we were able to sing together this morning, I'd have us close this service with Luther's famous words in his famous hymn,
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him,
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

That little word is love – the love of God that triumphs over sin, over pain, over brokenness, over fear – in short, over everything that separates us from God and leaves us powerless to live as God’s image and likeness in a world that so desperately needs that kind of living.

Friends, we don’t have a vaccine for covid-19 yet, and we don’t know when we will; that time and season has been appointed by God. We don’t know when schools will be able to open again and what schooling will look like when they do; that time and season, too, has been appointed by God. We don’t even know what our workplaces will look like as we move into a new normal informed by technology in a way that we haven’t seen before; but even that time and season has been appointed by God.

But in the midst of all of our unknowing, what we do know is that the power to see us through has already been given to us by the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Whether we’re voluntarily staying away from loved ones to keep them healthy, or washing down surfaces to keep everyone safe, or venturing back into public places to try to get people working and paid again, we’re all animated by the same Spirit. We all do better, Paul Wellstone liked to say, when we all do better. This is not a time for self-interest; this is a time to focus on the common good. And there’s nothing more common than the Spirit of holiness that hovered over the waters and brought forth God’s good creation. A virus can’t undo the goodness of creation. It’s all still good.