

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Ronald W. Botts, Minister for Pastoral Care, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, on Pentecost Sunday, May 27, 2007 and dedicated to the glory of God!

“Power When You Need It”

Acts 2:1-18; John 14:15-17, 25-27

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Let us pray: *Oh God, may your Word speak to our hearts today. Amen*

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It’s strange what things stick in your mind over time. Maybe it’s a poem we had to memorize when we were younger. Perhaps it’s an old telephone number you had years ago or the name of someone you met briefly at a party. Our memories often seem to be very selective.

Fellows, why is it that you can remember every detail about that first car you owned and yet manage to forget your anniversary? The mind plays funny tricks on us, but don’t count on using that as an excuse.

What I tend to remember, and wish I didn’t, is advertising slogans. “You can be sure if it’s Westinghouse.” “Where’s the beef?” “With a name like Smucker’s it’s got to be good.” “Can you hear me now?” “Expect more. Pay less.” The other day I was trying to encourage my mother to eat lunch and I caught myself saying: “You gotta eat.” It doesn’t seem to matter whether I buy the product or not, the slogans stay with me.

Some time back I woke up in the middle of the night and a thought went through my mind, “Power when you need it.” I think that was motto of a battery company way back when. 3:00 a.m.

coming out of a sound sleep and I've got "Power when you need it" on the mind. I have no idea where it came from. Some brain cell somewhere had stored it long ago.

That slogan drifted in and out of my thoughts for some time until, mercifully, it finally left me. It wasn't until earlier this week, as I worked with today's texts, that it came back to me - probably the first time that my random memory has ever contributed something worthwhile. Because of what I found in the Scriptures, the words spoke to me now in a new and more profound way: power when you need it.

We can imagine that, following the death of Jesus, everything must have seemed adrift for the believers. After those many days in close association with their Master, it was strange indeed when he was no longer among them. How readily they had looked to him for guidance; now they were without him. No doubt their grief was overwhelming. The forward movement of their faith came to a sudden and abrupt stop. Their energy was at a low and they found themselves waiting for whatever would come next.

And then in a moment, and together, such an unexpected change came over them. Others outside the group saw what was happening, but could only assume that they were drunk. The text says, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all gathered in one place." This Pentecost, from the Greek meaning "fifty days," was a Jewish festival day, the Feast of Weeks. It was held 50 days after Passover each year. You'll recall that it was at Passover, just some seven weeks before, where Jesus had gathered with his disciples to eat what would be their last supper together.

The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, was holy to the Jewish people. It was the time in their agricultural calendar for completing the barley harvest and for bringing the gifts of first fruits. Over the years it also became a time for remembering God's gift of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. So it was for the commemoration of this festival that the

disciples of Jesus had gathered, just as Jews had always gathered on this day.

Again, from the text: “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like a rush of a violent wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.” Something was happening, something they didn’t understand but, whatever it was, it was coming with power. Whatever it was, it took hold of each of them. It was too real to be denied. The story continues, “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 began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Peter interprets all this in light of the ancient prophecy of Joel, which predicts a time when God’s spirit will be poured out and the people will be empowered from within. This, Peter attests, is what is happening here. The Spirit has come and is among them and is changing them as a result. This day is a dividing point which will now carry them into the future.

After the death of Jesus the disciples must have been in a kind of spiritual hibernation. Now, all of a sudden, they were coming alive in a way they had never been before. They were awaking to a new sense of potential inside them. And the sensation was so great that they were also filled with an irrepressible desire to share with others what the Spirit was doing in their own lives

Whatever those disciples experienced together on that day, it is impossible for us to understand exactly what it was. As we read about that occurrence, it seems so different from anything in our own lives. Yet, we can surely identify with their anguish beforehand. We have all gone through those times when our spirits seemed to be in winter season. At such periods we found our souls empty; there was no satisfaction, no growth, no advancement.

We, too, like those disciples of old, have been lost at times and without direction. The flame of faith seemed to be burning at a very low level. Nothing was making sense, despite the assurances we were hearing. We can understand where the disciples might have been because we have been there, too. Our souls, like theirs, have been tried.

In such times there is a tendency for people to cast aside their faith because it no longer seems adequate to sustain them. It feels weak and ineffectual in light of the challenges being faced. When people are profoundly shaken, their coping reserve can be quickly depleted.

The last months in our congregation have been difficult. We have walked the road with a number of our friends through illness and crisis. While some of the journeys have ended with a hoped-for destination, even more are heavy upon our hearts because they didn't. We have seen numerous friends continue to suffer and we have reluctantly had to say a final good-bye to others. Deaths of church members and family members have been too regular with us recently.

If a person confides to me that he or she feels hollow inside after all this upheaval, I can identify with that numbness. Many days I feel that way, too. Because of my calling within the congregation I am surrounded by grief and pain on a regular basis. I feel the hurt of members that most others know as well, but often I am also aware of the private despair that permeates the lives of dozens of others at any given time. I am on the inside of what so many are struggling with.

These arduous periods are filled with many questions for me as I am sure that they are for you. Easy answers in such times are simply insufficient. We pray, we hear the assurances of God through Scripture, and we are kept going. Still, we long for more because we need more.

Today, especially today, we need this Pentecost. Not just the liturgical day, but the personal pentecost which has the possibility of coming into our lives to give us new confidence, new energy, new power. We need all that God can give us to push us, pull us, prod us, and propel us from where we are to where we need to go. We have been stunned and sapped of a good deal of our congregational vitality by what has happened recently, but there is work to be done and Christ needs us to do it. If we are not to be the hands of Jesus, then who is?

So, let this be our prayer on this Pentecost, the birthday of the church:

Come Holy Spirit, and pour yourself out upon us today. Lift us out of spiritual despondency and put us back on the path of full life again. Help us to dream dreams and have new visions of what is yet to be. Turn us from melancholy in the loss of friends to catch the joy that they showed us through lives of service. Give us the power we need, for we surely need it now.

Let today be a dividing line that will take us from where we've been to where you want us to be. God, show us the way. Give us the tools. Fill us where we're empty. Love us till we overflow with love for others. Teach us to trust. And make this be the time and this be the place of renewal. Amen.