

The Bethel Pulpit —

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February 21, 2010 – Lent 1

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On the web at www.bethel-madison.org



The Sermon Text — Acts 2:1-12

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 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 began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'

SERMON – The Spreading Flame: Pentecost

I've been thinking a lot about power lately, and nearly every time I begin to think about a subject I find that the Bible addresses it in some way.

One reason I've been thinking about power is that Bethel has been drawn into the debate over the remodeling, or expansion of the Edgewater Hotel. In the midst of the discussion we discovered that a neighborhood group was working on a development plan that affected the Edgewater, and strangely enough, it affected Bethel as well. We began to attend meetings to protect our interest and became aware of one of the power struggles going on in Madison. A company is attempting to remodel or rebuild the Edgewater, and a group of people are trying to prevent it from happening. Power is the ability to affect change, or as my dictionary says: The ability or capacity to perform or act effectively.

Who has the power to bring change to the Mansion Hill District? A developer? A mayor? Or, who has the power to prevent change? Community activists? Neighbors? What part does money play in all of this? Money and power are often linked.

There are, of course, many different kinds of power. Our nation is involved in two wars. In these wars many different kinds of power are being utilized. One of the tools on our side is technological power which translates into the use of major force. The enemy also uses force, but of a different kind. We shoot rockets, and drop bombs from a

distance. They use human bombs, people who blow themselves up.

I just made my 12th trip to Puerto Rico. On this long trip I need an interesting book. My book for this trip was the latest publication by Malcolm Gladwell, "What the Dog Saw." One of the chapters included two stories about the use of power in two earlier wars. Gladwell writes that at the beginning of the first Gulf war the U.S. Air Force dispatched two squadrons of F-15E Fighter Jets to find and destroy the Scud missiles that Iraq was firing at Israel. The rockets were being launched from the backs of modified flatbed tractor-trailers, moving around a 400 square mile section of Iraq's Western Desert. The jets waited for the Scuds to light up the sky, and then located the target using a state-of-the-art \$4.6 million device called LANTIM, a navigation and targeting pod. Initially, it appeared that the jets were very successful in their operation. Pilots returned with glowing reports and began to put box scores on their windows. They had real power in their hands.

Gladwell has another bombing story to tell in the same chapter. In 1943 200 B-17 bombers from the U.S. Eighty Air Force set out from England for the German city of Schweinfurt. Two months later, 228 B-17s set out a second time for the same target. They were operating with something called the Norden bombsight, driven by a computer called the Mark XV, which was so accurate, its creator boasted, that it could put a bomb in a pickle barrel from 20,000 feet. We spent \$1.3 billion developing it. Our goal was to destroy ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt, figuring that since ball bearings were critical to the manufacturing of airplanes, we could cripple their air power by knocking out those factories. We lost a huge amount of planes, but we declared the raids totally successful. We had hit our targets and used our power to overwhelm the enemy.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles is also about power, though a very different kind of power. The promise Jesus gave his disciples was: 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." (1:8)

Chapter Two is about that power turned loose. On the day of Pentecost the power of the Holy Spirit touched the lives of over 5,000 people. The symbols of God's power was fire and wind. The result was increased religious faith. This is a story about Spirit Power which was used to transform lives and change institutions. Spirit power changed the Mediterranean world by offering a new life alternative that changed the world for good. The Christian movement healed the sick, fed the poor, took care of widows, and found homes for orphans. It was an egalitarian movement. Listen to Peter: "In the last days I will pour out my Spirit upon ALL

flesh...YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY...YOUR YOUNG MEN AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS AND DREAM DREAMS...EVEN UPON MY SLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN WILL I POUR OUT MY SPIRIT. Men AND women...young AND old...slaves AND free.” This is a life changing movement.

Frequently spiritual power has been ridiculed. You remember Stalin roaring in laughter when he was told that the Pope opposed him... “How many troops does the Pope have,” he asked?

Before we ridicule spirit power let’s take stock. Here are two stories told by my friend Mike from his Iowa congregation. When he started his church Steve, a farmer, and his wife visited the church. Steve let it be known that church was for his wife and kids. He wasn’t opposed to it, and he would come on special occasions, but he wasn’t a believer. And for the first year he came a couple of times, though his wife and kids were there every Sunday. Then shortly after Easter Steve showed up at Mike’s door. Something had happened. He heard the story of Doubting Thomas and was convinced the story was about him. He had spent the week following that sermon thinking about Thomas, and about himself, and he was now a believer. “The story hit me like a ton of bricks,” he said. “I am a believer. I believe the whole thing. I believe that God is the creator and that Jesus rose from the dead. I believe that God is real. I want to not just believe, but do something.”

Steve decided he would go with his church on a mission trip to Ghana. During the next five years he went back six more times. He became convinced that the major problem in the village they visited was clean water. Children and adults were dying in huge numbers of water born diseases. The average life expectancy in that village was 29!!! Like a good farmer, he decided to fix the problem. He visited the water specialist near his home town and found out that to drill a well, and to put in a high quality filtration system would cost \$8,000. He figured that they would need 7 wells, so he asked his pastor if they would attempt to raise \$56,000 during Lent. Steve described the problem, and Mike preached a sermon, and the congregation raised money enough for ...61 wells. 61 wells. Spirit power. How does this compare to the power we need to build a hotel or to prevent a hotel from being built?

Mike’s second story is about Laura a woman who identified herself as broken and ruined. Abused as a child she told the pastor she was damaged goods. She told him, “You will never understand because you are a man.” Mike encouraged her to meet regularly with the pastors at the church and to see a Christian counselor. She did both, for three years.

Over and over again they helped her contemplate Jesus on the cross forgiving his enemies, and saying, “Father, Forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” With the pastors she studied Jesus with the woman at the well. She did the work necessary in counseling, discovering that change is hard...it is often two steps forward and three backward.

Laura got better. She decided to help others, developing a group called, “Set Free,” that worked with other women who were abused. Women in huge numbers from the church and the community now attend. One day she spoke in church and announced, triumphantly, “I am not damaged goods.”

Spirit power. Spirit power often changes one life at a time. Sometimes it changes entire communities. Just know this, it is real. Lives are changed. We are talking real power.

I am not denigrating other forms of power. In terms of the Edgewater Hotel, the power of the developer, or the power of the activists will win out. Only later will we know what kind of a difference it will make in the lives of Madison people.

As for the power we see let loose on Pentecost the people who were in Jerusalem went home and formed little cell groups. The message of Jesus was shared, and when missionaries arrived the cell groups grew into home churches. What began as a Jewish reform movement soon became a powerful movement that out lived, out loved and out served every other religion that existed. Men and women, young and old, slaves and masters found a freedom in the forgiveness of their sins and the powerful love of God. Stay with us through these forty days of Lent as we study these stories about lives transformed. Join a Bible Study group, listen on Sunday mornings, and you will learn amazing things about the ability of God to change lives. You will taste Spirit Power.

Two things you need to remember. Don’t underestimate the power of the Spirit, and don’t overestimate the power of force and weapons.

Back to the stories told by Malcolm Gladwell. Though our massive use of bombs and weapons initially was deemed a success it was later discovered that our World War II bombing of Germany was not what we thought. Though our planes hit their target we failed at our mission to wipe out the ball bearing factories. The Germans had out maneuvered us. They ordered ball bearings from other countries and they hid their supplies in places out of reach of our bombs. Our massive power did very little.

And the F-15 E success? When they checked the film later they discovered that our sophisticated planes, the ones that could put a bomb in a pickle barrel at 20,000 feet had actually hit zero targets. Zero.

Don’t overestimate the power the world loves so much.

Don’t underestimate the power of love, the power of grace, and the power of forgiveness which can transform the world we live in without losing a single life, without destroying others. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you...now go and give witness in Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin and the ends of the world. Amen.

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