

“Not us, but God in us”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Acts 2:1-21 and 1 Corinthians 12:3-7

by Rev. Patrick Heery

A couple years ago, I heard about this guy—young, strong, big muscles, worked out at the gym every day. He was a construction worker, and he could lift objects that typically took two or more workers to lift. Problem was he liked to brag. He was always talking about how strong he was, challenging his co-workers to competitions. He especially went after Bill, one of the older workmen. One day, Bill got fed up. He said, “OK, you’re so strong, put your money where your mouth is. I will bet you a whole week’s wages that I can haul something in a wheelbarrow over to that building that you won’t be able to wheel back.” The young guy smiled and said, “You’re on, old man! It’s a bet!” Bill reached out and grabbed the wheelbarrow by the handles. Then, nodding to the young man, he said, “All right. Get in.”¹

Doesn’t matter how strong we are, there are some things we cannot do by ourselves.

We try so hard, though—don’t we? We try to care for our families, maintain a home, be successful, be good Christians, care for our neighbors, make a difference in the world, all while trying to enjoy life, make enough money, be healthy. It’s exhausting—this toil to be good enough. Sure there are times when we take pride in how hard we work. We attribute our success to what *we* have done. But no matter how hard we try, we always seem to fall short. There are never enough hours; there’s always someone or some goal we’re letting down. It’s not surprising, then, how tempting it is to give up trying, hiding in momentary gratifications. It’s also not surprising that a lot of us double down and try harder, pushing ourselves until we have nothing left to give—until we’re like an idiot in a wheelbarrow trying to push himself.

I know this, because often, I am that idiot. And let me tell you, that wheelbarrow ain’t goin’ anywhere.

Last week, the gospel called us to get to work, to hit the streets, to put our faith into action. It’s a call we need to hear. But it can become a burden, yet another way to fall short.

I’d wager that’s how the disciples were feeling at the beginning of our Scripture today, like they were stuck in a wheelbarrow. The guy who was pushing it, Jesus, has left. Those doubts we hear from the crowds, those sneers about backwater, redneck Galileans and wine, might be the same doubts some of the disciples are feeling: Am I up to this? Others might be tempted to feel a surge of pride, like they’re better than all these other folks, like they earned their seat at the table.

Then Peter stands up—a man well acquainted with doubt, a man who has walked through the vagaries of both pride and despair—and he says that they, the people of God, are more powerful

¹ I’ve adapted, and partially rewritten, a joke found on jokes.christiansunite.com.

than they know. But it's not their power, at least not theirs alone; it's a power that flows through them. He calls this power the Spirit. It's not us, he says, but God in us.

There's still someone pushing that wheelbarrow, after all.

In Peter's sermon, God declares, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams."

This is a really important distinction Scripture has made. Because if it's just us—trying, trying—we'll never make it. We're relying on a limited supply of strength, and it will run out. But there is one source of power that is inexhaustible. It is the power that hovered over the void and breathed creation; the power that met Moses in the desert in a bush that burned but did not burn up; the power that descended upon the disciples on Pentecost. A gift, a grace: the Holy Spirit.

The nuance here is that while it's not us alone, it's also not God alone. It's God in us. It's God inviting us to become partners, co-conspirators, collaborators in the divine power that is coursing through us even now.

The disciples *will* be brave. They *will* be faithful. They *will* be strong. Because they will serve the Spirit that is within them. It is the Spirit, Scripture says, that gives them ability. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." Even our faith is an act of grace.

To receive this power, the disciples had to make themselves open and receptive. It's like how, every winter, when I want to start my snow blower, I have to turn on the fuel valve, so that fuel can be delivered to the engine (or however it works). If that valve is shut, no fuel is getting in. In the same way, we've got to open our valves so that the Holy Spirit can pour in. Our work, like the disciples, is to gather in an upper room, pray, be open, cultivate mindfulness, so that the Spirit can move through us. Far from contradicting last week's sermon and its call to action, this reminds us of the source of that action.

Jesus went up mountains; we might too. We'll read Scripture. We'll hold the ones we love. We'll remember to sing and dance. We'll ask for help. We'll look for the places where we come alive, and we will run there. We'll kneel in gardens and pray with Jesus, "Not my will, but thy will be done." And as we pray, we will listen.

In his essay titled "Nature," Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity... which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." When I first read those words, as a teenager, I furiously scribbled in the margins, "I HAVE FELT THIS!"

Elsewhere he writes that each of us is “a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost” called to “acquaint [people] at first hand with Deity.”

I hear those words from Emerson, and I think of another Moses, another bard of the Holy Ghost: Harriet Tubman. I think of the woman who walked nearly a hundred miles to freedom, who went back over and over to save her people, who scouted, nursed, spied, and fought for the Union Army, who never lost a passenger on the Underground Railroad, who said, “God’s time is always near. He set the North Star in the heavens; He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free.”

I think of Harriet, and I think the same power that was within her is within you. The same power that resided in Moses, in Peter and Paul, in Rosa and Martin, even in Jesus, resides in you. It pulses beneath the surface of your skin, no less than blood. It beats as steadily as the heart. Give it voice, give it one chance to speak and act, to live in you, to be seen by the world, and God will walk the earth.

All our Scripture these last few weeks have been leading to this one realization. In Athens, Paul said, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Before his ascension, when Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, he said, “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:20).

When it’s not us, but God in us, we are like that mother who lifts a car to save her child with a strength that should be impossible.

I have seen that strength for weeks now, in the wake of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many other black sons and daughters. I have been witness to black men and women—bone tired, hopeless, angry, hurt, dying from grief—stand up and speak, cry, tell their truth, shout “I can’t breathe!” Last week, four black men did that right here in Auburn through a panel. Last night, they did it again, joined by four white men, determined to take action for the physical, spiritual, and mental lives of people of color everywhere. If you haven’t, you need to watch these conversations, because they are signs of holy strength.

Right now cities across our nation are burning. While we name the many organized, peaceful demonstrations, we should grieve the violence, the destruction (especially of black-owned businesses), the loss of jobs, the intrusion of those inciting violence, many of them white supremacists. But we should grieve more the cause. We should grieve more the state-enforced genocide of a people, which peaceful protest has not been able to stop. We should grieve more the despair that is voiced in riots.

Some see in these protests and riots mere destruction; I see the soul of a human being crying out; I see power longing for its truth. If it—that divinity, that power, which naturally endows all humanity, which speaks through black skin no less than white—cannot be allowed to be seen in its poetry, its love, its children, its history, its feats of mind and body, its genius, then it will inevitably be seen in force, in fire, in tears, in hands raised, in cries of “I can’t breathe.” If you don’t want riots, don’t kneel on the neck. Let the man breathe, and he will utter the power of God to save the world.

God's Pentecostal challenge, and hope, for you today is that you will discover the power of God within you, and let that power—no less than rivers—flow. Let not you, not your agenda, not your exhaustible efforts, but the inexhaustible God act in and through you. And, let this be so for all people. “Even upon slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy,” says the Lord. Even upon the oppressed, upon the tired, upon the ones who can't breathe, God has poured out God's Spirit. Let's build a world in which that divine power is heard and voiced in every person, no matter the color of their skin. Again I say: Let the man breathe, and he will utter the power of God to save the world. **Amen.**