

"Spirit Powered"

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament: Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c
New Testament: John 20:19-23

Jerry Weintraub tells the following true story from his days as the talent manager of the late, great singer/song writer John Denver. In the 1970s while on tour in Europe, Denver began complaining about the hotels, the sound system, the food – and threatening to fire Weintraub. So the manager flew to London to calm down his singer; he told him he took care of it, he fired the guy handling the tour, a guy named Ferguson. A few days later Weintraub approached Denver about their decision to fire Ferguson. It was close to Christmas, and Ferguson had a family.

He told John Denver this “Ferguson thing” just didn’t feel right; that firing a guy at Christmastime – that’s just not in keeping with the spirit of John Denver, not to mention the spirit of Christmas. Denver agreed, and admitted he had been terribly troubled ever since Ferguson was fired. Weintraub made him a deal; he would simply move Ferguson to another part of the company. Denver agreed and left the meeting feeling great again.

A few days later, Weintraub asked Denver how the tour was going. The singer said the hotels were better, the sound system was crisper, everything was better since Ferguson was moved elsewhere. “Of course,” says Weintraub, “there was no Ferguson.” Weintraub had saved his job and made his singer happy again – without really doing anything. Now that’s power.

Power can be used for both good and evil. I get a sense there was a little of both in what Weintraub did – saving his job through a lie while raising the spirits of John Denver, knowing the singer was so far from home at Christmastime on a European tour.

In our New Testament Lesson today, the resurrected Jesus displays a lot of different ways of living in the spirit, what I loosely refer to as powers, powers that we have as followers of Christ. Jesus came, as John describes it, “when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week” – Sunday. In coming to his disciples on a Sunday, Jesus shows us the power of establishing and keeping sacred observances – such as Sunday worship, daily prayer time. This is Power No. 1 among all the powers Jesus displays in today’s scripture passage. The power to keep sacred observances. And it comes as the disciples are cowering behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews,” as the passage says. By coming among the disciples as they feared for their lives (not that there’s really anything to fear about faith), but by coming amid their fears, Jesus demonstrates the power to overcome fear and dissolve the barriers that

divide us. Locked doors are made irrelevant. This is true whether they are actual, solid-wood doors such as the one Jesus walked through, or the doors of our heart that we use to lock certain people out of our lives. The doors we hide behind because of fear or discomfort.

Power No. 2 is the power to overcome fear and to dissolve the barriers that divide us. When we are gripped by fear, our natural instinct is to protect ourselves. But our faith reminds us there's enough grace in the world for us to take a breath – to receive a breath from God – to take time to look and see if, in protecting ourselves, in using our instinctive power of self preservation we aren't causing the downfall of someone else. Will our angry reactions cause another person to close herself off? Will our race to get to work on time cost another driver the serenity and peace of setting his own pace? Does the stowing away of our riches mean someone else goes without?

Have I ever let the fear of failing cause me to peak at my neighbor's test paper or use someone else's work, without even realizing that I will be the loser in the end, the one left feeling guilty deep inside, the one who has disappointed my family, led my friends astray. And all because I was gripped by fear, a fear I imagined was even worse than death, or at least spiritual death; the death of a part of me inside.

Jesus shows his disciples that cowering in the face of fear – that hiding behind locked doors – serves only to put up barriers in life, to close us off from the life God would have us lead. And then he says to the disciples, "Peace be with you," and he shows them his hands and his side, the wounds that brought on *his* actual death.

Power No. 3, as displayed by Jesus, is the power to overcome death, even our physical deaths. And in this, Jesus gives us the power to not fear death, to stand up to the most severe physical and earthly troubles – if it means being true to whom we are as followers of Christ and recipients of the Holy Spirit.

Bob Garfield, writing in *The Washington Post*, tells about returning to his hotel room in Seoul South Korea after a pub crawl with a half-dozen South Korean advertising executives, all of it on a full stomach of a hearty dish of Korean dog stew. "As I prepared for bed," says Garfield, "I was stricken with crushing chest pains radiating down my arm and into my back. Obviously, I was having a heart attack. Or a gas attack; how are you supposed to tell? I thought of calling for help," says Garfield, "but then I considered the problems of communication, and the chaos, and the potential for embarrassment – to say nothing of the uncertainties of Korean cardiac care.

I imagined the emergency-room physician saying, "Yes, Mr. Garfield, you are having a serious myocardial infarction. I will now place seven tiny needles in your eyelid." So Garfield decided to take his chances. He managed, through the pain, to write a brief, tender note to his survivors. And then he laid down at peace with himself. "I loved my family," said Garfield. "They loved me. I had accomplished some interesting things in my career: no felony convictions; sufficiently insured. Go to sleep now, Bob," he said to himself. "Maybe you will wake up. To the best of my knowledge," says Garfield, "I did.

And I was joyous,” he says, “not that I had lived through the night, but that I had not been afraid to die. I was at peace with myself, a priceless revelation.”

What do we value the most? On what side of the scale is our life balanced – do we live our lives placing sufficient weight and value on our sense of eternal peace in Jesus Christ, or do we let fear run our lives, dodging any earthly dangers or misgivings, even if it means giving up our sense of peace?

If we have received the Holy Spirit, if we have let the Spirit of Christ be our guide in life, then we are assured of finding peace and even joy in the face of earthly fears, any fear. Seeing how Jesus overcame death, says the Gospel of John, the disciples rejoiced. They rejoiced when they saw the risen Lord, complete with the wounds of his execution. Jesus’ victory over death brought them joy. That’s one of the benefits of receiving the Holy Spirit, the power to bring joy to others in any circumstance. What a great power that is, joyous Power No. 4.

And then “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you.’” If Power No. 4 is the power to bring joy, then No. 5 is the power to bring peace. Continuing, Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Power No. 6 then is the power to inspire and lead people; to send them forth. And Powers No. 7 & 8 are similar. Jesus displays these powers just before sending the disciples into the world. “He breathes on them and says to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Here, Jesus demonstrates our power to equip the people in our lives (Power No. 7), and to share the spirit of Christ with others (Power No. 8) – the powers to equip and to share. Then Jesus’ demonstration of the power of living in the Spirit takes a turn. What he’s showing them shifts in a new direction.

Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven then; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Powers 9 & 10 are (1) the power to cleanse and restore and reconcile, and (2) the power to condemn and police and exclude; the power to forgive sins and the power to retain them.

Nine out of 10 powers demonstrated by Jesus bring closeness and joy and peace and raised spirits. And one power – the power to recognize sin has taken hold in someone’s heart; to hold another person accountable for his or her misguided thoughts, words or behaviors – only one power leads to isolation and condemnation.

Jesus balances this singular power, the power to hold sins against another human being, with nine ways that we can affirm each other, preserve our faith, and persevere under God’s care. Nine ways we can bring a greater sense of peace into our lives. And this leads to the ultimate question: How well *are* our lives balanced as followers of Christ? *Where is Christ in the balance of our lives?* Are our lives rightly weighted overwhelmingly toward joy and peace and reconciliation?

Leith Anderson, the preacher at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, tells of a bicycle race in India where the goal is to go the shortest distance possible within a specified

time. When the starting gun is fired, all the bicyclists stay put, trying not to tip over or have either foot touch the ground. They inch forward just enough to keep the bike balanced. When the time is up and another gun is fired, the person who went the farthest is the loser, and the person closest to the starting line is the winner.

Imagine getting into that race and not understanding how it works. When the race starts, you pedal as hard and fast as you can; you're out of breath; you're sweating; you're delighted because the other racers are back at the starting line. You're going to break the record. This is fantastic," you think to yourself. "Don't let up. Push harder and faster and longer and stronger." At last you hear the gun that ends the race, and you're delighted because you unquestionably are the winner. Except, you are unquestionably the loser, because you misunderstood how the race is run.

Jesus gives us the rules to the race of life, to our life's journey. He gives us the power to balance our lives so we don't tip over, even when everyone else is powering ahead of us, juggling along toward a finish line that brings no real reward. In the race as God designs it, it's not those who are fastest or strongest who end up in the winner's circle. It's not those who outpace everyone else at all costs.

The true winners in life are those who maintain the proper balance for a spiritually healthy life; those who know that 9/10^{ths} of what we have as followers of Christ is meant to uplift and enliven those around us, and that only 1/10th – just a fraction of the power we actually wield in this world – is properly used to protect us from evil or misguided forces.

The proper balance for life – and for all eternity – is caring more about others than about protecting ourselves. It is letting others go first and not pushing to the front. It is giving, without having to get in return. So the question becomes, do we trust in God enough to lay down what we cling to in our earthly lives in order to preserve *our spiritual wellbeing*?

The next time you're feeling afraid or threatened or insecure about something in life, know that there's enough grace in this world for you to take a breath, that you've got time to breathe in the spirit of God. And then, in that moment, ask yourself, is this the one time when my fears are justified and my sense of self preservation is God-given, or can I – can you – rest assured that in the balance of life, whatever threat you face or misgiving you have is not likely to topple you, not the real you, not the you you come to know when you place your life in God's hands, observe the practices God has ordained and established and enjoy the life God would have for you, a life we all share in when we find a way to share in – and trust – the Holy Spirit among us and within us. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER^[1]

Lord Jesus, we have been in control of our lives, but now we want your Spirit to be the One who runs our lives. We are giving you all of our rights. Please take control of every area of our lives. Whenever we are tempted to take back control, point that out to us, and help us have the courage and strength to resist taking back control. Show us how to live on top of our circumstances and not under them.

Help us keep our eyes on you, Lord Jesus, instead of on our problems. Let us see you, Father God, as the One who can and will meet every need of our lives. Let us be sufficient in you and not in our own abilities and strengths. Help us to have the right balance between living in your control and exercising diligence in each facet of our lives.

Whenever pressures come that have been unbearable or debilitating, show us your perspective – anything we've been doing wrong or thinking improperly. Then show us how to correct our faulty actions and thoughts so that we can continue to walk in your Spirit's control.

We thank you that you want to do these things in our lives even more than we do. Remind us of that when our faith gets weak.

We ask all this in confident assurance – not in our own strength and resource – but in your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who meets us in our brokenness and need, and who knows us and shows us the way, even showing us how to pray, as we say together,

Our Father, who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
 and forgive us our debts,
 as we forgive our debtors;
 and lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

^[1] *Adapted from Glen Martin's "Beyond the Rat Race" (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995; 101-102.*