

POWER SOURCE

Acts 2: 1-21; John 15:26-16:7

The Day of Pentecost

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A man was fishing along a riverbank when he noticed some interesting behavior by another fisherman a little upstream. Each time the man caught a fish he carefully measured it. That is not particularly unusual. The strange part was that he threw the larger fish back and kept the smaller ones. His curiosity finally got the better of him and he wandered over to ask what that was about. "I couldn't help but notice that you measure all of your fish and throw the larger ones back," he said. "Most people keep the bigger fish and throw the smaller ones back." "I'm sure they do," said the one with the tape, "but I don't keep any fish over 10 inches." "Why?" the first man asked. The man looked and stated matter-of-factly, "Because I only have a ten-inch skillet."

The man let the size of his skillet limit the size of the fish he could keep. How often do we limit what we can do because of what we have, or don't have?

The disciples were in Jerusalem during the festival of Pentecost, a harvest festival celebrated fifty days after Passover. Anyone and everyone who could be there was there. This was a major festival, a time of family reunions and parties and banquets and special worship opportunities, so Jews living all over the world tried to be there. It was a joyous time.

The disciples were not joyous, however. They sat huddled indoors, afraid and discouraged. Jesus had been crucified, an experience that took the life out of them. Then he rose from the dead and appeared to them, reviving their souls. Then he left, again; this time ascending into heaven, leaving them feeling better but no less lost. So, they were not out in the street joining the city-wide party.

In many ways this would have been the perfect time to start in on the great commission about which Amanda spoke to us last Sunday – go into the world making disciples of all nations. Well, many of the nations were gathered right outside their door! They could speak with fellow Jews of multiple nationalities without even leaving town. It was a tremendous opportunity.

Except it wasn't. Not in their minds. They only had a ten-inch skillet, and the fish outside the door were way larger than that. Think about it. Not one of them was a public speaker and, even if one or two were, they spoke only one language. Most outside spoke different languages. So, no one would understand what they were saying anyway. Add to that that the people were there for a party, not a sermon, so who would pay attention? Not to mention that the authorities had executed Jesus less than two months before.

They surely would not look kindly on any of them speaking up about the Lord in the public square. They already felt like marked men. They did not want to draw attention to themselves. It is one reason they were inside. No, opportunity or not, this was not the time or place to start giving witness to Jesus. Their skillet was just too small.

It is easy to imagine what they were thinking and to empathize with why they felt immobilized because this is the narrative spoken in churches all around the country, maybe the world. Everyone agrees that there is much to be done and, many, if not most, agree there is opportunity. But there just isn't enough money available, or there are not enough people to help, or we don't speak the language, be it Spanish or millennial or the language of the poor, or whatever else is spoken by this group or that. Even if we do speak the language, and we are willing to speak, others just don't want to hear, so no one would listen anyway. No, the work requires a huge frying pan and we have only a ten inch skillet. The disciples were not the only ones discouraged and feeling limited. It is a rare day when one hears any church saying we have everything we need to do the work to which we are called. Almost always we hear, our skillet is only so big.

And you know what? That is exactly right. When people point out the challenges, I do not take them as excuses. I take them to be honest assessments of reality. It is a fact that our skillets are too small. What we forget is that we are not cooking with our skillets. We cook with God's skillet.

Seriously, if having an impact at that Pentecost festival long ago depended on the skill, gifts, and graces of the disciples, we would not be reading about it in the Book of Acts. Today would not be on the church liturgical calendar because nothing would have happened. The disciples stumbled and bumbled and misunderstood what was going on the whole time Jesus was with them. Now they were on their own. Chances were far better that no one in the crowd would give any of them the time of day much less they would give their lives to the Lord. If they used their skillet, nothing was going to get cooked that day.

Oh, but the Holy Spirit showed up with God's skillet. The Spirit took hold of them and moved them outside among the crowd. Now, we say that the miracle of that day was that the Holy Spirit interpreted, so that when the disciples spoke in their native Aramaic with a Galilean accent, every person heard in his or her own native language. Divine translation was going on. That's the big news about the Spirit that day.

But the Spirit did much more than that. First, the Spirit emboldened the disciples. One minute they were frightened and timid, huddled inside a locked room; the next minute they were in the street praising God. Then Spirit empowered the disciples, making it possible for them to do what they could not do themselves, and the Spirit kept the authorities from arresting them. That was a legitimate concern of the disciples, but nowhere do we read that the authorities paid any attention.

The Spirit also opened people up to listening. This is a part of communication we sometimes forget. Just because the disciples started speaking does not mean people automatically started listening. On a trip one time, Robin and I walked through the center of a city we were visiting. Standing on a large fountain in the center of the town square, a man, with all of his might, spoke about Jesus. When he began to lose voice, another took his place. They were loud. They were impassioned. I watched with some interest for a while. Not one person, not one, stopped, or even paused, to listen to what was being said. Yet, when Peter began to speak that day in Jerusalem, a large crowd gathered to listen. Surely, the Spirit made them receptive.

The Spirit opened the hearts of the people. Peter's speech was good but, frankly, it was not like the best sermon ever. And yet, 3000 came to believe and came forward for baptism. His words had the power of conviction and that power surely came from the Holy Spirit.

In so many ways the Spirit was at work making the impossible possible, or at the very least, the unlikely doable. The Spirit continues to work in this way. The lesson for us, then, becomes this: when responding to God's commission, the question to ask is not how big is our skillet, but is how big is God's skillet? This is important, because if success is dependent on the size of our skillet, it is not going to go well. Using God's skillet, though, changes everything.

I want to add a caveat here: we still have to apply our efforts, our resources, our gifts and our graces. The Holy Spirit works with us, not for us. Recently someone was seeking some advice about preaching. He was unsure about his ability to deliver a good message. First and foremost, I told him to trust the Holy Spirit, but I quickly added that he still needed to pray and to study the text and spend time putting the message together and to practice before he got into the pulpit. That is your work, I told him. Do not ask the Holy Spirit to do your work for you. It is not all right to get up without any preparation saying the Spirit will tell you what to say. Do your work. The Spirit will fill in the gaps and smooth out the edges and interpret for the people. Do your best knowing it will take the Spirit to make it right.

Churches sometimes decide what they would like to do and start down that path saying God will make it happen. That is not faith. That is foolishness. Job one is to discern what God wants us to do, not what we want to do. Job two is marshalling our resources and best efforts to make that happen. God, through the Holy Spirit, then solves the problems we cannot solve, opens the doors we cannot open, provides the resources we do not have, and makes possible what we cannot. We cannot do it without the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit does not want to do it without us. Think of it this way: the Holy Spirit translated, but Peter still had to speak.

On that Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit showed up and gave the disciples a push. “Get outside,” the Spirit said, “and let me show you what I can do.” The Spirit was the power source charging the otherwise powerless disciples.

We are just as motely a crew as those original disciples. Thanks be to God, we have the same power source that empowers us to do amazing things for God. *By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit* are words that should never be far from our lips.

Be open to the power of the Spirit. Don't throw the big fish back because your skillet is too small. God's skillet is ample enough.

Amen.