

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Mourning, Mystery, Mission: Who’s Got the Power?”
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Psalms 22:25-31, John 20:19-23

The memo read: “Dear Mr. President, I think that it is very important that I should have a talk with you as soon as possible on a highly secret matter. I mentioned it to you shortly after you took office but have not urged it since the account of the pressure you have been under. It, however, has such a bearing on our present foreign relations and has such an important effect upon all my thinking in this field that I think you ought to know about it without much further delay. Faithfully yours, Henry E. Stinson, Secretary of War.” So what was this important matter? It was the atomic bomb. Harry Truman had been Vice-President for 82 days when President Roosevelt died. The two had only met privately twice and nothing of substance was discussed. Then in the midst of the tragedy of Roosevelt’s death and the Second World War, raging around the globe, Truman was told that he and his nation now wielded the most powerful weapon ever made; the atomic bomb. And, more importantly, it would be up to Truman alone to decide whether or not to use it. He had to decide if it was a power for good or for evil.

In some ways this is always the way it is with power. People have to examine the power they have been given and make decisions as to its use. Will they use it for good or for evil? Parents have power. That power can be used for the good by giving order and structure to the lives of children in hopes that their children will ultimately choose a right path. That same power can also be used to diminish children, through abuse and fear. Supervisors or business owners have power. They can use that power to create a safe, nurturing environment in which people are encouraged and empowered to do their best; to be creative and caring. Supervisors or bosses can also use that power in the opposite manner, terrorizing their employees, causing them to live in fear. Politicians have power. They can use it to faithfully serve those who elected them, as well as those who did not. Or they can choose to use that power to enrich themselves and their families. Power in and of itself is not evil. Power is simply a tool.

My purpose in offering up these images this morning is to set the stage for what happens in our Jesus story; and that is the giving of power to the disciples. I realize that this may not be all that obvious in the story itself. If, however, we look at this story in the overall context of the Gospel, it becomes apparent. Here is how it works. First God has all the power. We know this because the opening of the Gospel of John draws us back to the creation account with the words, in the beginning. Second God share this power with Jesus. In the Gospel we hear things such as whatever the Father has, has been given to the Son, and even as the Father is working, the son is working. They share power. Now in the upper room Jesus is giving that same power to the disciples. This is evident when Jesus says, “Even as the Father has sent me, now I send you” and then gives them the Spirit. This is John’s Pentecost moment when the disciples are given the power mentioned last week by Jesus to his followers. The extent of this power becomes clear when Jesus tells them that they have the power to forgive or not to forgive...a power which at one point only belonged to God and then to Jesus.

The disciples, like Harry Truman, have been give immense power. The power to forgive or not to forgive is one that can either create life or take it away. The question would be, how would the disciples, and after them, the church, use this power? Unfortunately for the church, and in some cases the world, the church did not use this power for the good. As with all power, it tends to corrupt. The church, while beginning well, quickly saw this power to forgive or not to forgive as one that could give them control; control not only over the religious life of individuals but over their political and economic lives as well. It became a weapon to humble kings, princes and paupers. It became a source of revenue by selling it. It became one of the central weapons used to insure the power of the church. And even after the Reformation, Protestant churches used it as well to

exclude those that they believed had not lived up to the religious expectations of their peers. In some ways, this checkered past makes those of us here loathe to take up this power. We want to find some way to avoid seeing ourselves as those who possess this kind of power. Like a proverbial hot potato, we want to toss it back to God. Yet, we cannot. It is ours. It is the church's.

What I would like us to do this morning then, is to take a second look at this text and perhaps see it through a new lens. Here is how I propose we do it. We see this gift of power, the power of the Spirit and the power to forgive, as a test. Jesus has finished his mission. He has died and then been raised and now he turns to the disciples and says, here is your final exam. Will you forgive or not. That being the case, then let's remember what the disciples had been taught about forgiveness. They were to forgive seventy times seventy times. They were to forgive as they had been forgiven. They were to forgive others so that they might be forgiven. They knew that on the cross Jesus had forgiven those who had crucified him. They knew that Jesus had not only forgiven Peter for betraying him, but had given him a mission of great importance after he had been restored. In some ways I believe that Jesus is saying, you know what to do, now go and do it.

The same is true for us. We as the church have been given the power to speak forgiveness into the world. We have been given the power to offer forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. We have been given this power and the question is, will we use it. I ask, because forgiveness is the power to restore. It is the power to break the chains of hate, anger and dysfunction. It is the power to free; to set people free from their past and bring them back into right relationship with God and others. Forgiveness is in some ways the greatest power in the world.

Many of you who have been here for the past couple of years will remember me talking about my friend Suzanne. She was one of the many "mothers" I had in my last congregation. I would have been about the age of their children, so they adopted me. Suzanne had grown up on a dairy farm south of San Antonio. She and her five siblings had worked hard and given all that they could to help their parents. When their second parent died, and the will was read, five of the siblings got ten acres of land. The sixth sibling, the oldest son got everything else; most of the farm land, the house, its contents, the farming equipment and the cash that went with it. Needless to say, Suzanne and her other siblings were stunned. But Suzanne, being who she is, went to her brother and told him that there was only one thing she wanted from the house, a picture that her mother had promised her. Her brother told her to get off of his land. Everything was his and he was keeping it. Years later, following a sermon of mine about forgiveness, she decided that she would go make amends. She found out where he lived...he had sold the farm for a great price...and went to see him. The upshot was he told her to leave and if she ever showed up again he could call the police. Fast forward ten years. About a month ago Suzanne's only remaining sibling, outside of her brother, died. Two days before the funeral, Suzanne's phone rang. It was her brother. He first asked if he could come to the funeral. It was free country, Suzanne replied. Then her brother asked for forgiveness for what he had done and how he had treated her. In that moment Suzanne held the power. She could forgive or not forgive. It was up to her. And she forgave. Since that time they have spoken on the phone on numerous occasions and are making plans to get together. This is the power of forgiveness used for the good; to give life.

You and I, both individually and collectively hold the power of forgiveness. The question is then, how will we use it? My challenge to you for this week is this, to ask yourselves, "How am I wielding the power for forgiveness, for the good? How am I passing the test that Jesus has given me?"