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May 31, 2009 – Pentecost Sunday
The Power of Pentecost
Acts 2:1-41

This morning I decided to share the Power of Pentecost with you by telling a story about the work of the Holy Spirit on me, in my life. I'm a visual person, you'll hear more about that later, so let me set the stage....

It's an early spring day, a Sunday in 1984. I had walked out, in tears, yet again during the church service. I was shuffling back to my apartment on Dead End Alley where I lived with my sister and her 2 young sons. I stopped along the way at an elementary school playground. I was swinging on a swing talking with God. It went like this....

Ok, God, how should I do it? Should I use my rifle? No, too messy and I'm not brave enough. No, I'll use pills...Ya, OK, pills.

God? What's wrong with me? Why can't I be a better person? Why am I so bad? God, I'm not good enough to stay on this earth. But God, if I kill myself, what will you do with me then? Oh God, I know I deserve Hell. God, I don't want to go to hell but I just can't stop sinning! I'm no good anyway...you'll never forgive me so why should I stop sinning?

I went on and on and on for quite a while. Thanks be to God I exhausted myself and finally shuffled my way home. Laurie, my sister, took one look at me and called our pastor. They scheduled an appointment for me the next day.

I can't say that I recognized the Holy Spirit working in me that day but in retrospect I believe the Holy Spirit protected me. You see having suicidal thoughts was not new for me. I'd struggled with it since I was a teen. I'd already been in counseling but I couldn't shake the core belief that I was not good enough for God. Unfortunately, I took it a step further and thought that since God would never love me anyway there was no reason to change my sinful behaviors. In my mind I had done unforgivable things. The one thing I clung to was that I desperately wanted God to love me. The problem was I didn't what real love was so I couldn't imagine the possibility of God's love.

I met with the pastor the next day and for several weeks thereafter. And, with his help, got to a stable, albeit tentative place where I could continue to function. I actually started to clean up my act some and eventually was able sit through an entire worship service.

Several months later I had a call from a man on the Session of my church. He asked me to meet him for lunch the next day. I agreed to meet him then promptly called the pastor to see for what committee he'd asked this Bert Lanstra to recruit me. He said, Bert? I didn't ask Bert to call you. Long story short, it turns out the committee Bert wanted to recruit me for was the Lanstra family committee. I was 26 when I married Bert, a 44 year old widower with 2 teenagers and 2 pre-teens. I was not terribly fearful of joining the family, mostly because I was ignorant of what I'd be facing. One of my greatest fears though was that someone from the congregation would enlighten Bert as to my past. So, in a pre-emptive strike I told Bert first. A miraculous thing happened. He loved me anyway. I believe the Holy Spirit gave me the strength to confess to Bert and the Holy Spirit gave Bert the ability to accept my past and not hold it against me as we viewed our future.

Married life and parenting began. When I struggled as a step-parent I figured God was punishing me for my teen years. We tried, unsuccessfully, to conceive. Surgery finally made it impossible for me. I thought, "God is punishing me for my sin filled life." My behaviors had changed significantly, I'd repented of those earlier behaviors but I couldn't get out of the mindset that God couldn't and wouldn't ever forgive me.

When I tried to express my concern about my faith and my doubts about my salvation Bert would say, What's the problem? God said, "If you confess and repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ you are saved. Just believe it!" Oh to have such faith! For me it was easier said than done. When someone asked, Are you saved? I said yes. But the truth was I could say it with my mouth and think it in my brain but I couldn't believe it in my heart. I was simply unforgivable!

In a Christian meditation and journaling group I visualized Christ running through a meadow toward me in slow motion with his arms outstretched much like you'd see in a romantic movie scene. As he embraced me I asked, Lord how is your love for me different than Bert's? I immediately envisioned Christ nailed to the cross saying with his dying breath, "This is what I did for you." I believe it was a gift of the Holy Spirit that enabled me to see this vision. Pretty powerful huh? You'd think that a vision like that would have sustained me for life but I still had this nagging doubt. Christ died for the sins of the world...for you and you and you but not me...I could easily believe it for you but not me, I was too bad. I could not believe Christ died for me.

I struggled along keeping my thoughts and feelings about my salvation to myself. I did a pretty good job too. I was very active in the church, I was on committees, a Pastor Nominating Committee, even Session, but I had a nasty secret...I wasn't sure I was saved. No one knew I was struggling. And I worked very hard to make sure people remained in the dark. Actually I did a pretty good job of accepting that I was OK on the outside and just worked to keep my doubts hidden on the inside. I can't say I was happy with the situation but I guess I was content.

Then several years ago Bert and I attended our first Dunamis Conference. It was at Bingle Camp outside of Fairbanks. Dunamis is the Greek work for power, as in the power of the Holy Spirit. It was a 4 day retreat-like conference. On the first night about 20 people met in the chapel and learned what the next few days would entail and we did some book learning about the Holy Spirit. Then we had some quiet time for prayer and meditation. At closing the leader asked if anyone wanted to talk about their meditation time. One woman said, "I was not able to focus on anything other than asking the Holy Spirit's protection over this gathering because I feel that Satan is right outside this window trying to come in." My mind flashed, Oh God, Satan's not out there. He's right here, in me! Another woman talked about her vision of Christ separating the wheat (the good) from the chaff (the bad), that the chaff would be consumed by fire. My response was, "Oh God, I'm the chaff!" The vehemence of these thoughts shocked me. I fell into despair. One of the leaders saw me sobbing as Bert gathered me up to get me out of there asked, What's the matter? I told her, "It's me. I'm the chaff!" She smiled sweetly as she asked, Oh Honey, are you saved? Her smile disappeared when I flatly replied, I don't know. Boy was that a long night. I wanted to go home lest my presence taint the whole group but something, no someone, well, the Holy Spirit gave me the courage and strength to stay.

I knew I needed help. Two women met with me for an individual prayer session. I briefly told them my history and struggle with sinfulness and my inability to accept God's forgiveness. I could

say with my mouth and had the 'head' knowledge that God loved me but I couldn't believe it in my heart. One woman offered visualization as a helpful tool. Remembering my vision from years earlier I thought, cool, I can do this. I bowed my head to concentrate on the visualization and somehow described the picture as it occurred. "Christ is dying on the cross. He lifts his head and kind of sneers, "I did this for you?"

I crumbled. I was doomed. I knew there was no hope for me. The next thing I heard was, "Satan, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit release this woman. You have no power here."

I shivered, I shook, I sobbed. But, as I caught my breath I realized, it's gone. My doubt is gone. So, now I can confess with my mouth, and believe with all of my heart, mind and soul that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior and yes, my sins are forgiven and I am saved.

Now I recognize that this is the kind of story that's hard for some folks to hear because it is so foreign to your experience. It may even give you the hee-bee-gee-bees. That's OK. It certainly turned my life upside down and took me on a path of ministry I never expected.

So, why do I share this testimony with you? Some of you know I ride a motorcycle and I'm a member of the Christian Motorcycle Association. In CMA we share stories about our 'Pasts'. Sometimes it devolves into a session of 'One-ups-manship'. "You think you were bad just wait 'til you hear how bad I was!" That is not my intent here. I'm telling this story because there is peace in the power of Pentecost. If you do not have the peace of Christ in your heart; if deep down in the darkest recesses of your heart you do not know that you know that you know that Jesus loves you AND that you are saved, please do not leave things that way. Life CAN be better. See me or Peter or an Elder or another Christian you know and talk with them. Peter will be up in the front of the sanctuary after the service go up and ask him to pray with you. I'll meet with you. That's what we're here for! Don't be content...There IS peace in the Power!

Each of us experiences God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in unique ways. Your experience does not need to mirror my experience anymore than mine mirrors the story of Pentecost.

Pentecost was Jewish festival. Jews from all over the New Testament world were in Jerusalem for the festival. In the passage we read this morning, Peter shares the gospel message. He reminds the people of the Prophet Joel's words some 900 years earlier. He links scripture with which they were familiar to what they were seeing that day with their very own eyes. God used the power of the Holy Spirit to begin the work that Jesus commanded before his ascension when he said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." All the people from that long list of countries had the opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ that day.

And Peter's message was effective for the gathered asked, "What are we to do, brothers?" Peter's answer to all of us was, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." That promise continues for us today. No matter what you've done, where you've been, how you have behaved if you repent and trusting in Jesus as Lord and Savior, ask him into your heart, he will forgive your sins and you WILL receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray,

Holy God, the promise of Pentecost is the promise of power — the power to know and believe the redeeming work of Jesus Christ; the power to forgive our own guilt and the guilt of others; the power to be courageous in the face of danger; the power to offer hope and joy in the midst of pain and suffering. Embolden us, we pray, to testify to your presence in the world, to show your love for all humanity and to open our hearts to being radically changed by your Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen