

**“TRUE POWER”**

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Text: Luke 4:14-21 NLT

God's Word: Psalm 19 (NLT)

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<sup>14</sup> Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit's power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region. <sup>15</sup> He taught regularly in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. <sup>16</sup> When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. <sup>17</sup> The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written:

<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me,  
for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,  
that the blind will see,  
that the oppressed will be set free,

<sup>19</sup> and that the time of the LORD's favor has come."

<sup>20</sup> He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"

When you hear the word "power" what comes to mind? Do you think of influence or wealth, such as a person who strides down the "corridors of power"? Do you think of an authoritarian or dictator? Or how about physical strength, the powerful frontline of a football team, for instance? Or how about the ability to get what you want when you want it? Or someone who is able to tell others what to do?

Our Gospel Lesson for this morning begins with the line: "Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit's power..." This is the first scene in Luke that describes Jesus' public ministry. First things matter in the Gospels because they set the tone and priorities for the things to come.

So, it's important for us to know that Jesus comes filled with power and, maybe even more, it's important for us to know just what Jesus' kind of power looks like. And this makes the passage from Isaiah that Jesus reads in the synagogue very interesting because if there is one thing all the kinds of people referenced by Jesus have in common, it's that they are definitely not the powerful people of the world.

Think about it. Jesus has come to preach good news to the poor...proclaim freedom for the prisoners...recovery of sight for the blind...and to set the oppressed free.

These aren't the powerful, they are the outcasts, the defeated, the down and out. They are the ones we have been trained to feel sorry for as we pass by them at the street corner even as we give thanks to God that we are not in their shoes. These are the folks we may pity, but not admire.

Yet Jesus says He has come for them. And this challenges our typical notions of power, does it not? Right before Jesus *"returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit"* He had been in the wilderness, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil. And the devil tempted Him to become "powerful" in a worldly sense.

And to use that power to turn stones into bread, to rule—with an iron fist—over all the kingdoms of the world, and to dazzle the crowds with spectacular acts that would cause people to bow down to Him in fear because of His "seemingly" great powers.

But Jesus said, "No" to all the devil's temptations; the devil left him for a time, and Jesus returned to Galilee *"in the power of the Spirit"* not in the power of the world, or the power of the devil or with power over people. We might think that Jesus' encounter with the devil would leave Him empty, but in denying what the devil had to offer Jesus gained more of what He really needed. And that is Holy Spirit power.

This is what we need as well, is it not? The power of the Spirit is a power that brings peace and joy and love—love for God and love for neighbor. It transforms us. It re-creates us into God's image, and frees us to truly live. And when we choose the Spirit's power rather than our own power or the power of the world or the supposed power the devil is offering, then we gain more of what we really need.

A colleague tells the story of his early work as a pastor when he went to visit a death-row inmate convicted of murdering a teenage girl. At the time of his visit the inmate had been awaiting execution for twenty-one years. The young pastor was a bit nervous about visiting with someone who had committed such a horrible crime. He expected to find a monster. When they spoke, the inmate talked over and over again about grace. Eventually the pastor asked him if his sense of grace had overcome his sense of guilt. The man answered: "The gospel requires us not simply to be sorry, but to be transformed by our sorrow. For me, this is a daily transformation."

For this prisoner, guilt and grace stood in tension. Forgiveness had not erased his memory of his sin, yet he insisted over and over again that Christ had freed him from it. He said, "I will never forget what I did. But there has to come a point where you receive forgiveness and then forgive yourself. Not to justify your actions, but to accept God's love...It does not matter where you are. It is who you are that matters. I am a person who is loved and forgiven by God." Then, writes the pastor, "he rattled the chains that tied his wrists together dismissively. As if they did not matter."

The pastor jumped back from the table. Their conversation was over. Not because the killer had done something violent or said something awful, but because he had claimed the love of God as his own. He claimed that Jesus had already set him free, and the pastor was overwhelmed. He

writes, "I stepped into that prison with my heart in my throat, anticipating the worst of the worst. Instead I found a broken sinner, redeemed and pieced back together by the love of God. Instead of a monster I found grace, a power strong enough to transform monsters into gentlemen."

We have a God who has sent Jesus to "proclaim freedom for the prisoners."

What are we, who are not behind the bars of a prison, to make of this? As we read our Gospel Lesson for this morning, let's remember that poverty, captivity, and blindness have both physical and spiritual dimensions. It is bad to have an empty wallet, but even worse to have an empty soul. Captivity is terrible, but Bonhoeffer and others have shown that it is possible to remain free in the midst of horrific imprisonment. Athletes, actors and rock stars struggling to free themselves from drugs, exhibit a true kind of slavery. Helen Keller was blind from infancy, but her words and actions show a clear ability to see to the very core of life.

Are you or someone you know a prisoner to something? Are you or someone you know blind to the love and grace of God? Are you or someone you know spiritually poor, desperate, struggling, lost? If so, Jesus has come with Good News for you and for all. For we all suffer from these conditions in one way or another do we not?

Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'"*

This is Jesus' mission statement for His life. It encompasses Who He is and what His ministry is about, and how people—who accept Him—will respond to Him. And as the Church of Jesus Christ, His Body on this earth, it is our Mission Statement as well.

This is what our ministry is to be about. We are to choose for ourselves the power of the Holy Spirit and then, in kind, offer this power to others. For this power is God's power; it is the only TRUE and REAL power. The power of dictators goes away as soon as they are overthrown or die. The power of celebrity is here one minute and gone the next. The power of money can only take us so far. It cannot fulfill us. It cannot cause us to love. It will not transform us for the good, and we cannot take it with us.

Again, the only REAL power is of the Holy Spirit. It is demonstrated not by accomplishments or things that a person claims for themselves...it is only demonstrated through what it does for others. Power is power only when it sets others free, only when it builds others up, only when it is used for the betterment of those around us.

How different this is from the way the world thinks of power. How amazingly off-base we naturally are. The power of God at work in Jesus Christ transforms our ideas of power because it

turns our attention away from ourselves to those around us. To forget oneself in love for God and neighbor—that is TRUE POWER.

Think of Jesus. He is truly the most powerful person to ever walk the earth, and yet He never sought attention for Himself. He humbled Himself to the dust. He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom. He hung out with all kinds of people, from the self-righteous Pharisees who didn't know they needed His Holy Spirit Power to the lepers, the outcasts, the prostitutes, the criminals, the hated, the down and out.

And for those who did realize they needed Him...well, He set them free through the Power of the Holy Spirit. And with that Holy Spirit Power working in them, they built Jesus' Church which, against all odds...against everything the world would have expected from a small band of nobodies...and that Church became the most powerful force for good in the world.

Now, certainly, we—the Church of Jesus—get off base. We get into trouble. We become corrupt and powerless. And that happens when we go running after the world's concept of power—money, self-absorption, pride, and the like. But when we do what we are called to do...When we follow Jesus and allow Jesus' Mission Statement to be our own...when we deny what the devil has to offer...which is just filthy rags...and focus on Christ and Christ alone...When we reach out to the stranger, love those whom the world deems ugly and unlovable, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, give clothes to the needy, and proclaim the Good News of Jesus' life, love, death and Resurrection...lives are changed, and even monsters turn into gentle men and women.

And there is no power on earth or under the earth that can accomplish that—only the Power of the Holy Spirit living and bubbling up inside of human beings. What we miss out on when we reach for the fool's gold of the world. How poor we become when we seek the riches and power of the world. How enslaved we are when we chase after fame and glory. How blind we are when we ignore the plight of others and put ourselves ahead of everyone else. How oppressed we are when our lives are steeped in sin and self-absorption.

But the Scripture has been fulfilled. The One Whom Isaiah the Prophet talked about is here. And we have a choice. We don't have to be left to fester in our own devices. We don't have to be spiritually poor, bound in chains, lost in the dark and oppressed by the world.

We can choose to follow Christ. We can choose to be filled with REAL POWER...SELFLESS POWER, LOVING POWER, GIVING POWER, PROTECTING POWER—God's Power offered to us without price through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

And when we are living lives filled with this power we will always have trouble, just like everyone else...but there is nothing in this world that can defeat us.

“Take heart,” Jesus says, “for I have overcome the world.” Now THAT is POWER.

Praise God! Amen.

