

The Power That Went Out from Him

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

June 27, 2021 Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 30:2-4, 11-12; Lamentations 3:22-32; Mark 5:24b-34

Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fifth Sunday after Pentecost. It is a joy to have you here both on Zoom and in the sanctuary... We are making improvements each week to our new hybrid worship format. Please bear with us and let us know after the service if you have suggestions of how this can work better. Thank you to Justin Wylie for being our recording engineer and zoom master and to Christina Robinson for being his assistant and to David Webb, Deadra Ashton, Paul Kifner, Keith Fifield and Andy Behrens for countless hours to help make it happen. Welcome to Carol Rousseau in Annemieke's absence, and thank you choir members...

Our way of worshipping has changed in the past fifteen months, but as the Steering Committee pointed out in their letter about our regathering next Sunday, the most important things remain the same. God is still here, the Spirit that filled Jesus, the Spirit that created the earth and nurtures life with its faithful flow of mercy and steadfast love, the Spirit that gives us the insights and power we need to evolve and do hard things, to work miracles of healing, justice and peace—that Spirit is within and around us, and whether we are here in person or by Zoom or watching the recording, our task is to open our hearts wide to that Spirit, to seek its way through the complexity of our daily lives, to seek its gifts right now. So let us let go of whatever distracts or holds us back from this transforming presence, because it wants to fill and flow through us to transform the world. Let us worship together in this faith...

The Power That Went Out from Him

This is an exciting time in the life of this church. Never before in its two-hundred-year history has it suspended worship in this sanctuary for fifteen months, so never before has it had the kind of regathering we anticipate next Sunday.

We would like to carry into the future positive changes that came during the pandemic. One is a more closely connected congregation. We adapted Joys and Concerns to give everyone

the chance to speak. Later in the service I will talk about an experiment I'd like to try to continue a spiritually meaningful level of sharing.

We also want to continue including people in our gatherings who cannot get here physically, whether they are away from home or stuck at home.

We do not know how all this will work. It may take months of making adjustments before we settle into a new routine. Next Sunday many people may be here or few, we have no way of knowing. We hope people who are not able to be here will join us by Zoom, and we hope those who cannot do either will remain connected by watching the recording of the service.

It may take a while to adapt to these changes to the point that they feel normal. In the meantime, there are some things we know have not changed.

We know that church attendance has been steadily declining for decades nationally and especially in Vermont.

Yet we also know that the church is an invaluable repository of wisdom about a life-transforming and world-transforming spiritual power. The church has collected expressions of that wisdom in beautiful and deeply moving forms over thousands of years—music, poetry and art, social movements, model communities and exemplary lives.

This sanctuary is one of the beautiful expressions and vessels of the Spirit that the church has passed down to us, so we rejoice to be regathering, but what we have seen so clearly in the past fifteen months is that the most effective instruments of the Spirit's power are people, us, when we open wide to let God's steadfast love and faithful care and tender mercy flow through us.

Time and again during the pandemic people on our Zoom Joys and Concerns said that our gatherings and our congregational connections and care were getting them through. Time and again we were enriched by others' courage or spiritual wisdom or sharing of what matters most.

We were so moved when people came from their surgery recovery beds or from hundreds of miles away. We wanted to make sure that they could feel through the screen how we were holding them in our circle and surrounding them with our love.

A congregation may be small in number but it is great in power when those connections happen, when that Christ-like loving and healing force flows through us.

Today's passage from Lamentations reminds us to be patient when life is hard, when we feel lonely, unseen and unheard, when we have been humiliated or attacked, because the steadfast love of God never ceases, and God's mercies are new every morning. Great is the flow of that faithfulness.

As Psalm 30 says, when we cry for help, the loving Spirit of God will heal us, it will lift us out of the darkest pit, it will give us new life, it will turn our mourning into dancing.

We may wander a long time in the darkness of lamentation. The widow in today's Gospel story was sick for twelve years and had spent all she had on doctors and treatments. She lived in hopeless poverty as an impure outcast from religion and society. She had reason to despair, but found just enough faith to sneak through the crowd to touch Jesus.

And at last, something worked for her. Power went forth from Jesus. Her faith connected to his faithfulness and it was great enough to transform her life.

Jesus said, "Follow me," and then he walked through streets and country lanes and mountainsides with that generative power of God flowing through him doing miracles without his even intending them, simply because he opened completely to the Spirit of God that filled him.

Jesus said in the Gospel of John, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." (John 14:12) He said that the reason we would be able to do such works was that he would help connect us to the source of the spiritual power that created the universe.

The contemporary Christian contemplative master, Thomas Keating, says that when a person opens and becomes one with the flow of the Spirit, all she or he has to do is walk down the street and that power will work miracles of lovingkindness without any conscious intention on our part to do so. The light that we focus on will fill us and shine through us.

Another contemporary contemplative master, the Franciscan, Richard Rohr, says that from the perspective of Saint Francis, most people's understanding of church is backwards. Most people think we live in the secular world and go to church, but what Francis calls us to do is live in church and go into the secular world. Live in the Spirit, live in that creative and healing flow of love and mercy, justice and peace. If this is where we always live, we will bring God's life-giving love wherever we go.

What does it mean to live our lives in church as our home, and go into the other places we live as an instrument of the gifts we find here? Does it mean to spend more time within these walls, or to be here on Zoom when we cannot be here in person? Does it mean to become a closer community, sharing our lives together, extending our care and support to one another? Does it mean to immerse in centering prayer and heartfulness, meditation and mindfulness, spiritual reading or music or art? Does it mean to participate in the supportive work of the Deacons or the activism and advocacy of the Mission Committee and Fulfilling Our Vision group?

Theologian and writer Frederick Buechner offers a helpful way to answer that question for ourselves. He defines Vocation, saying, “The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.” (from *Wishful Thinking*)

Each of us will feel called to be an instrument of the power of the Spirit in a different way, and that is good. We need them all. We need what your share of that power will bring into the church and into the world. The important thing is that we reach out to touch the Spirit’s power, that we open to it in faith, that we give our life to it. That is what the world most needs.

May it be our deep gladness as well.

Let us pray in silence, reaching out to the Spirit with our hearts wide open in faith to receive its power...

A Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Where water pours into a pool,
tadpoles swim on their backs
and play.