

DON'T FORGET THE BATTERIES

Acts 2:1-21

A man at an airport was worried about missing his plane. He had no wristwatch, and he couldn't locate a clock, so he hurried up to a stranger and said, "Excuse me, could you tell me the time, please?"

The stranger smiled and said, "Sure." He set down the two large suitcases he was carrying and looked at his wristwatch. "It is 6:08, the temperature is 75. The barometric pressure is 30.19 and falling. Rain is predicted. In Madrid, the sky is clear. The temperature is 40 degrees Celsius. In Istanbul, the weather is sultry and the moon full."

"Your watch tells you all that?" the man interrupted.

"Oh, yes...and much more," said the stranger. "You see, I invented this watch, and there is no other timepiece like it in the world!"

"I want to buy that watch!" said the man. "I'll pay you \$2,000 for it right now!"

"No, it's not for sale," said the stranger as he picked up his suitcases.

"Wait! \$4,000. I'll pay you \$4,000 cash," offered the man, reaching for his wallet.

"No, I can't," said the stranger. "You see, it has great sentimental value for me."

"O.K. listen," said the man. "I'll give you \$10,000. I've got the money right here."

The stranger paused. "\$10,000? Well, O.K. It's yours for \$10,000."

The man was absolutely elated. He paid the stranger, took the watch, and snapped it on his wrist with glee, and said, "Thanks," as he turned to leave.

"Wait," said the stranger. With a big smile, he handed the two heavy suitcases to the man and added, "Don't forget the batteries."

Silly story, but this is the continual temptation that haunts us as the church, is it not? That we will forget the batteries--that we will forget the source of our power. That we will leave behind what is essential to the life of the community of faith.

On February 2, 1985, the Daytona 500 Auto Race had just started when, on the beginning of the third lap, the \$250,000 machine, driven by professional driver Donny Allison, rolled to a stop on the infield side of

the track. When it was checked, it was found that no one had filled it with gas.

How embarrassing. One of the top drivers in auto racing stalled because he had run out of gas. But that is where many churches are. And that is where many individuals are. Trying to operate without batteries. Trying to drive on an empty fuel tank.

Ever since Christ's ascension, the disciples and the women and the brothers of Jesus had been devoting themselves to prayer in the upper room. They had been preparing themselves to receive the Holy Spirit that Christ had promised them. Now it was the day of Pentecost and they were all together in one place. Suddenly, there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind, and it filled the whole house. And they saw tongues of fire which seemed to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues.

Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem from every nation on earth. And when this sound occurred, a large multitude of them came together, and they were bewildered because they were each one hearing the disciples speak in their own language. "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" they asked. "How is it that we each hear them in our own language? We hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God."

Obviously the church on the day of Pentecost had its fuel tank full. Its batteries were connected. So, that leads us to ask: What can we learn from their experience that will energize us as we celebrate Pentecost today?

Here is the first thing we need to note: **THE SOURCE OF THE CHURCH'S POWER IS THE SPIRIT OF GOD.** If we are going to have the joy and the energy and the enthusiasm of the early church, we are going to have to pray for God's Spirit to fall afresh on us. Anytime we try to substitute any other kind of power for God's power, we are in trouble. It makes no difference what that power may be.

It may be political power. The church has often in the past sought to exercise its political power. Sometimes this has had beneficial results--sometimes not. Laws regarding the separation of church and state are usually very fortunate laws. They keep the state from meddling in church affairs and they help the church resist the temptation of political power. Political power is no substitute for spiritual power.

Or we might substitute what might be called celebrity power. Many growing churches nowadays, as a central part of their ministry, bring in celebrities--musicians, athletes, politicians--to share their faith. Nothing wrong with that—as long as we remember that these celebrities are just people. They sin just like the rest of us. Their weaknesses do not disappear just because they are in the public spotlight. Any church that builds its faith on the power of personality--even the personality of the pastor--is in trouble. People have a way of letting us down. But that is another form of power in our world today--celebrity power.

There is even a danger of what we might call need-centered power. One of the effective ways of growing churches in today's world is to focus on people's needs and to begin groups within the church to meet those needs. So in many churches today you will find all kinds of 12-step groups and recovery groups and support groups, etc. All of these are good, and they are a vital part of the church's ministry. We are here to meet people's social and emotional and even their physical needs. As long as we do not lose sight of our central reason for being.

Maybe you heard about a certain hen that won dozens of awards. She was really quite amazing. If you put a red quilt in front of her, she would lay red eggs. If you put a green quilt before her--green eggs. A blue quilt--blue eggs. But one day someone accidentally put a plaid quilt in front of her...and the poor bird died trying to deliver the goods! That can happen to us. We can be so busy trying to be all things to all people that we lose sight of our central reason for being.

Nothing in the church can substitute for God's Spirit as the basic source of our power. If we ever become what God means for us to become, it will not be because of our programs--as effective as they may be. It will be because God's Spirit lifts us.

One writer has used the analogy of an albatross. He notes that the albatross has the longest wingspan of any living bird: 12 feet. He also notes that it is too heavy to fly--it can't support itself in the air. In fact, in still air, it can't even take off. Yet the albatross is a marathon flier. Some speculate it can stay years at sea without returning to land. Scientists put a radio transmitter on one to track it. After 30 days and 9,000 miles, the battery gave out, and the albatross was still over the ocean.

How can a bird too heavy to support itself be a marathon flier? The answer: it doesn't flap. It glides. It is a master at riding the winds. For example, it knows that slightly higher, the faster air currents provide

greater speed. Then it dives, letting gravity give acceleration. Then it catches an updraft off the waves, and the cycle starts all over again. The albatross not only survives winds of almost any force at sea, but it is not even blown off course. It can ride out the storms by reading the winds and circling. Then when calm returns, it continues on its way.

We need to learn from the albatross. If we could ride the winds of God's Spirit, we could accomplish far more than we think possible. That is the first thing we need to learn from Pentecost. The source of our power is God's Spirit.

THE SECOND THING WE LEARN FROM THE DAY OF PENTECOST IS THAT WHERE GOD'S SPIRIT IS THERE IS UNITY. People of differing backgrounds, differing social classes, differing skin colors, differing national origins, all heard the Gospel in their own tongue. Rather than fragmenting into tiny self-serving groups, they were drawn into a cohesive whole. One day, we are going to see how silly we have been about all the barriers we have erected between people.

There was a cartoon once which showed two people staring at each other. One was a little man in a loincloth, looking like Mahatma Gandhi. The other was a stalwart man with a full feathered headdress looking like Sitting Bull. Both are speaking simultaneously, and the caption reads: "Funny, but you don't look Indian."

Silly perhaps--but also thought provoking. And we should not forget the Irishman who said he would rather die than be buried in a Protestant cemetery. What an absurd world we have created.

When Billy Graham held his historic crusade in Montgomery, Alabama, in the sixties, he insisted on an integrated choir. The newspaper editorialized that Graham had come to Alabama and set the church back a hundred years. Graham's answer was classic: "If that's the case, I failed in my mission," said Graham, "I intended to set it back two thousand years." Where the Spirit of God is present, there is unity. When the waters of God rise, the fences disappear. No longer is there male or female, black or white, Jew or gentile. There are only precious souls for whom Christ died. We are one in the Spirit.

Of course, that is even more important when we apply it to the church.

A somewhat humorous story came across Associated Press lines sometime back about two groups of firefighters in a small town in Maryland that came to fight a fire and ended up fighting each other. It seems that paid and volunteer firefighters got to the fire at the same time and argued over who should be the first to carry a hose into a burning townhouse. Eventually, they had to be separated by county police. Fortunately, the fire was put out before too much damage was done. BUT I COULDN'T HELP BUT THINK OF THE CHURCH. Rather than fighting the fires of evil in this world, we would rather fight each other. Not so with the church at Pentecost. They prayed together, ate together, even shared possessions with one another. The source of the church's power is the Spirit of God. Where the Spirit is, there is unity.

But one thing more: WHERE THE SPIRIT IS, THERE IS OUTREACH TO OTHERS. Where the Spirit of God is, people are concerned about sharing the good news of Christ with their family, their friends, their neighbors... The church at Pentecost was a rapidly growing church. They were reaching out.

Richard Lederer is a teacher and writer who has become nationally known by collecting what he calls ANGUISHED ENGLISH. Lederer collects such things as unintentionally funny headlines and signs, etc. You've seen some of his work. Here are some typical classified ads from one of his books: "Home. \$199,500. Great Location. 2/3's of an acre with 4 bedrooms, 2-bath, brick Cape. Built the way they used to. Won't last." Or, how about: "For sale: Bull dog. Will eat anything. Loves children." And my favorite: "Extremely independent male. 17 years old, needs to rent room. Call his mother at..."

PEOPLE magazine did a story on Lederer. Their photographer asked Lederer to think about setting up a humorous, posed picture that would somehow summarize his work and lead into the article.

The solution immediately presented itself. On the outskirts of Lederer's town stands a telephone pole with the street sign ELECTRIC AVENUE. Sure enough, right below it is a yellow diamond traffic sign announcing NO OUTLET.

And that is the greatest danger for the church--that we will experience God's electricity but find no outlet. That we will experience God's power but will refuse to share that power with others. That we will experience God's unity among ourselves but shut out others. That we will have the joy of God's Spirit but not try to bring joy to the world.

Have we forgotten the batteries? The source of the church's power is God's Spirit. Where the Spirit is, there is unity. And where the Spirit is, there is a concern for reaching out to others.