

What would you do if you had all the power in the world? Would you be generous to help people or a tyrant that does as he/she pleases? This question about power may excite out the best of our generosity and self-giving or the worst of our ambition and greed.

Writer Robert Ingersoll in speaking of Abraham Lincoln, said, “But if you wish to know what a man really is, give him power. This is the supreme test. It is the glory of Lincoln that, having almost absolute power, he never abused it, except on the side of mercy.” (Volume 3 of the 12-volume “Works of Robert G. Ingersoll, 1902)

Most people think they don’t have power unless they are rich or famous, but everyone has power. Each of us has a great deal of power to make the world a better or worse place. Did you know that? The way you choose to live your life in relation to those around you will make things better or not—you can either let your words and actions be led by greed or mercy.

One person with all the power -even beyond this world- has never used it for selfish desires or to destroy his enemies but to have mercy and save others. This is Jesus the Christ.

In the Bible, we find Jesus talking about his power and his willingness to share it with his followers, that is, his disciples. What kind of power is Jesus’ power? It is a power to give and sustain life.

Today, we are going to hear from Jesus about his power and how we receive it. The Scripture is Acts 1:1-8,

“In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Let’s recall the context of this text briefly. The last few weeks since Palm Sunday, we have been learning about the journey of Jesus and his disciples. We learned about Jesus coming to Jerusalem before he was killed. We learned about his crucifixion and resurrection and how he appeared to the disciples—including Thomas, Peter, and two on the road to Emmaus.

A lot has been going on during those times. Jesus revealed his resurrection and reminded his followers of what he promised them: a new and everlasting life with him in his kingdom.

All these years, Jesus spent his time calling, teaching, and giving an example to his followers about the kingdom of God and the character and power of such a kingdom. This was

not a kingdom to destroy the enemy or oppress subordinates or break the people's backs to accumulate power and wealth, but a kingdom to save the lost, protect the vulnerable, heal the sick, and feed the hungry—a kingdom to give and sustain life in abundance.

This was not an abstract concept or promise that would take place sometime in the future after our time, but a tangible blessing for today to all people. For example, on many occasions, Jesus stood between abusers and their victims. He defended women and the poor; he confronted the powerful and oppressors. Jesus taught about love, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation from sin and death. In his own words, he said, "I did not come to condemn anyone but to save everyone." (John 3:17)

Can you see the picture here? Jesus is life and uses his power to give life to those that welcome it. His power is not about money, political manipulation, taking advantage of others, or abusing the weak. His power was not about making Israel great again or build it back better (as the disciples were still misguidedly hoping when they asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"); no, his power was and is for the sake of those he loves. And the crazy thing is that Jesus wants to share his power with us so we can share the life we received from him with others too.

That is what's going in the Scripture we read today, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses [everywhere you go]."

This was not the first time Jesus spoke about the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus talked about this promise before, and he explained that when the Holy Spirit (which is the very presence of God with us, not an external force we can manipulate) would come, she will remind the disciples of the teachings they learned from Jesus, and will guide them with faith, wisdom, and conviction so they can do the works of Jesus too and teach his teachings. But in here, Jesus adds one more characteristic: the power to be witnesses.

Now, what does it mean to be a witness? And witnesses of what?

What is a witness? Witnesses tell what they know, what they have seen. The dictionary defines the word "witness" this way: "One who has seen or heard something" and "One who furnishes evidence." A witness is someone who can say, "I know this is true." In a court of law, a witness swears on a Bible and promises to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. In other words, witnesses tell the truth of what they know.

If Jesus wants us to be his witnesses, then, a witness of what? We can sum it up this way: The disciples testified to what they knew to be true about Jesus Christ: what he did, said, and taught.

Jesus taught about loving God and our neighbor. He explained that love is practiced through compassion and mercy. Jesus taught us about forgiveness and grace; he revealed to us that God wants us and we don't have to prove ourselves worthy to be welcomed into God's presence. Jesus taught us about praying not just for the people we care about but also for those against us; he showed us how to pray like that when we prayed while hanging from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do." Jesus taught us about seeking

reconciliation by asking for forgiveness when we sin and forgiving those who sin against us. He urged us about not judging others and being hypocritical but helping each other live better lives. And, ultimately, he told us that we could have eternal life through him if we put our trust and faith in him as our Lord and Savior.

Simply put, Jesus is giving and entrusting his followers with his power to give life to others as we bear witness of who he is, what he did and said.

So, there, witnesses of that—with the power to do and tell what Jesus did and said. Jesus is giving us his power to have a life-giving purpose too. And this promise is for everyone that is a disciple, for those that have put their faith in him and chose to follow him and keep his teachings—those that want him and want to be like him.

What does all this mean, and how does it relate to us? It means that we have the power to influence the behavior of others and change the world into a place where love, compassion, and forgiveness shape us as human beings. We have the power to stop what's unjust and evil; what's rude and corrupting. We have the power to bring kindness, compassion, love, hope, peace, and so much more to so many.

Today this is particularly relevant to know. We are celebrating our seniors, our young people graduating from High School. Some of you may have dreams about how the world should be. Some of you may be ready to take on the world and pursue your dreams and passions with all your strength. Some of you may have had a difficult upbringing, and all you want is a new chapter where you can have a new start and a better life.

Do you want to make the world a better place, where there is justice and fairness, and people don't kill each other? Do you want to be successful and wealthy? Do you want peace and not have to worry about being hurt again?

I think you can accomplish all that and much more. You are strong and smart, and you have been through a lot already that I know you are learning wisdom. But as much as I want you to be successful and enjoy a great life, the most important thing is how you choose to follow Jesus. Notice that I did not say how you choose a church or religion, but a person, a relationship with whom created you.

Every experienced salesperson knows you can't sell what you don't believe in. People can tell a mile away if you are reading from a manual or rehearsing a memorized presentation. The best salespeople believe in what they are selling to the point that they are not selling anything—they are simply talking about what they know to be true.

When I was a senior like you, I was struggling to decide what to do. But when I let my faith guide my decisions, everything was made right. And here I am. I tell you this because this is what I know to be true. I am not pretending or rehearsing, just sharing my life experience. Of course, I am not trying to sell anything either; I am just a witness with the power to tell.

Please know this, all of us want you to be happy and successful, and I know that if you build your life on the teachings of Jesus and follow his example as a faithful disciple, you will be fulfilled. (This goes for everyone else too.)

This is the invitation to all of us, young and old: let Jesus give you his power by welcoming his love and grace for each of us. And once we do, let us be a witness of Jesus, keeping and living out his teachings, and as we are able, also telling others how we became aware of God's presence in our lives and how that experience changed us.

Can Jesus get a witness? You have the power to tell. Just tell it like it is. Amen.