EMPOWERED TO SERVE

Gen. H Norman Schwarzkopf describes his West Point experience as follows: “When I began as a plebe, duty, honor and country were just a model that I heard when I first came into West Point. By the time I left though those values had become fixed stars for me. It was a tremendous liberation; the Army with its emphasis on rank, metals and fitness reports is the easiest institution in which to be consumed by ambition. Some officers spend their time curbing favor and worrying about their next promotion; a miserable way to live. But West Point saved me from that by instilling the ideal of service above self, to do my duty for my country, even if it brought no gain at all. Far more than a military career, it gave me a calling.

On this Memorial Day weekend as we remember especially those who served and gave their life in service for our freedom, we remember these words from this general that are incredibly timely. That there are things in life that are more important than our own personal ambition, or the recognition of others. Really, the ultimate purpose in your life and my life is to truly discover our calling. What is our calling? What is our destiny from God?

If you will, and I would submit to you that at least for me in this quote by General Schwarzkopf, one of the pieces that stands out to me is that he had instilled within him, the ideal of service above self. That was the most important thing for him to do throughout his military career. I would submit to you that service above self is at the heart of ministry; is at the heart of God’s call in your life and in my life, and really for any human being that will truly realize their destiny, service is what life is all about.

For the church and of acts that we read about today, they would be learning about this throughout their ministry upon earth. Jesus had just ascended and the Holy Spirit had not had not yet come, the day of Pentecost had not yet arrived and it was a waiting period for them.

Could you imagine how difficult this waiting must have been? Here they were, this group of disciples who had been cowering in the upper room. Then they came to find out that this Lord that they thought who was dead (you remember the story on Easter day, they actually were going to the tomb to anoint a dead body that they discover that he’d actually risen from the dead); could you imagine their excitement, their enthusiasm? I imagine that after they had met the risen Lord, it was all that they could do to not just burst forth from that room and begin to tell everybody about what happened with Jesus, and how he had risen from the dead! Yet in the midst of that excitement, in the midst of the reality of their own enthusiasm, Jesus says to them something that is almost incomprehensible that makes completely no sense. He says to them the one word they never expected to hear in that moment...and that was “Wait”.

I want you to wait. I want you to wait until you receive the power of the Holy Spirit in your lives because you need the power the Holy Spirit for what I have for you to do. You see the early Christians, the disciples that were waiting in obedience to Jesus’ command, they needed the Holy Spirit. They needed to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. They needed to be led by the Holy Spirit. Beloved of God, I have something to share with you, for each one of us. Each one of us at this present moment, every Christian who will ever live in the world, especially us in this present moment, need the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives to live out the life that God is calling us to.
During this time in the early church, as the church listened to the Lord’s words and waited upon him, a new apostle would be selected to replace Judas. There would be worship services and prayer meetings. There would be teachings, just spending time together and waiting upon God. During that time of waiting, the Lord was preparing them and shaping them for what was to come, a very powerful and incredible thing.

You see the early church during this time of waiting was led by God to get its ministry organized, to begin to put the foundations in place. Today an apostle, tomorrow some deacons and after that evangelizing the world that they knew; turning it. In the words of the secular historians of the day, turning the world upside down.

You see ministries are a very powerful means that God uses to touch the world and touch individual people through you and through me. It is through the ministry of the church that God is going to reach the world. It is through you and me and it either will happen through in me or will not happen. That’s how God has left it and that’s how much the Lord has entrusted this work to you and to me.

In fact the New Testament word ‘diakono’ means to serve. The verb suggests the idea of waiting on tables. You remember the story in the book of Acts how the early church began to grow and the apostles were busy waiting on tables and serving the poor, the needy and the widows. They had a revelation from God. “Hey guys, you’re supposed to be preaching the word and growing the church. You are not supposed to be waiting on tables and serving the world in this way.” Therefore, the Holy Spirit let them, at that point, to establish the order of deacons. Deacon Bill (of St. John’s Episcopal Church) is a visible witness to you and me of what it means to serve the world, that you and I as the body of Christ come in here every week, however much we can during the weekdays, as well to worship the Lord. To study the word, to be in fellowship with one another, that we might go out into the world in power to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, who was risen from the dead. Do it with power, with authority and with the gifting that is from God.

One of the things that we need to realize is that the gifts that God has given you, expressed uniquely through you, will touch people in ways that nobody else can touch them. Each one of you is very special and unique. Your fingerprints are all different. Your DNA is unique and there is a reason for that. What God is saying in that I think in the very creativeness of our body, is that each one of you are special. There will only be one of you. You’re it. God’s ministry and gift through you will powerfully touch other people’s lives in ways that nobody else can.

Look with me in your reading in the book of Acts today in your bulletin. I want to focus in on just one part. Actually, toward the end, it is a part that Peter quotes. Actually, from the book of Joel... a prophecy that Joel has actually spoken hundreds of years before this day of Pentecost. In the last days God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams, even my slaves or servants, both men and women. I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy.” What Peter is saying on the day of Pentecost, that first day, is that, this is that day. You are experiencing the fulfillment of a prophecy. No they are not drunk; it is 9 o’clock in the morning first of all. They probably wouldn’t be speaking intelligently anyways if they were drunk. They wouldn’t be speaking in all these different languages. This is something that’s being orchestrated and empowered by the Holy Spirit of God. This is the day that God spoke about hundreds of years before that is beginning to take place. Sons and daughters prophesying. Young men seeing visions. Old men dreaming dreams. Even on slaves both men and
women I will pour out my spirit and they will prophesy. What God is saying is, I’m pouring out my Spirit on everybody for Pentecost onward. I will pour out my spirit upon people who will call upon me. Who will receive my son who is the Lord and Savior. I am giving them my Holy Spirit. Powerful, anointed, strength like nowhere else.

This is incredible power. The power that I think many of you, myself as well, have yet to really tap into. It’s one thing for me to stand up here today and share with you about power and to talk about what that power might be like. But it’s quite another thing for you and me to really accept it and to receive that power and be open to it.

During the first Persian Gulf War, we were resupplying The Theodore Roosevelt and we were on a small supply ship. When that ship pulled up beside us to receive our supplies, it was about three times as large as we were. It was just a massive, massive structure. After we resupplied it, The Roosevelt went portside and put the gas on. The bow of the ship actually came up out of the water. Now its speed is classified but that ship at that weight was going incredibly fast! I mean it just blew my mind. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. That ship is powered by nuclear reactors. Incredible, incredible power in those reactors. But what I have to say to you here today is that as awesome as that ship is as today, as incredible as it is in the water and what it can do, as much power as it has its reactors, and the incredible things it has to do on seas of this world, a Christian that is open to the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit is far more powerful than that ship and all of the navies of the world! That you are called to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. Do you realize that in the Scriptures that’s how you are described! Paul describes you as a temple of the Holy Spirit. Can you say that with me? “I am a temple of the Holy Spirit”

Yes! You are a temple of the Holy Spirit! Now some of you, your temple is empty. The Holy Spirit is not there or the Holy Spirit’s off in the corner. Like, why don’t you really need the Holy Spirit to live this life on my own? I know what you need, the Holy Spirit. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is called to live there and to dwell there. To be a source of energy and power of anointing and grace that you and I experience on a on a moment by moment basis sometimes in our lives. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, I just want to say to you that’s okay. You came to the right place today! Because I’m going to invite all of us in just a moment to open up the fullness of the reality that God is calling us to be fully and completely, temples of the Holy Spirit; where the Holy Spirit actually resides. Imagine that, where the Holy Spirit is active and moving, and happening in your life. Where somebody calls you on the phone, and shares with you the news that you weren’t expecting to hear where somebody is dying, or maybe they are dying or they’ve got a terminal illness or something tragic has just happened. The Holy Spirit moves upon you to pray for them. When you pray for them, you know in your spirit that person knows and their spirit God has moved and something happened. That’s because the Holy Spirit was part of the equation. That’s what I’m talking about. I’m talking about power for your life in your daily life. For you to do things and to be a part of things that you can’t even begin to imagine. That God wants you and I to be a part of. Your gift; the gifts that God has given you are powerful if you use them in the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. INCREDIBLY POWERFUL!

Daniel Nash was an intercessor for Charles Finney; some of you may have heard of Charles Finney. Actually, he was an incredible Evangelist and Preacher of his day. Thousands upon thousands would come to his meetings and would come to Christ. He was actually the founder of Oberlin College where our own Glenn Saffran attended school.
Charles Finney had somebody who is a very important part of his ministry and that was Daniel Nash. Daniel Nash would go to the Crusades site weeks in advance before Charles would even show up. He would lock himself in a room; he would pray. He would pray, day after day after day before Charles would even show up. When Charles came and he began to preach, if there was little response, word would be taken back to Nash to pray harder that people would be open to what he would be preaching about. God would move and thousands of people came to Christ to the ministry. The gift of Charles Finney and through the ministry and the gift of Daniel Nash... it is recorded that when Nash died Finney’s revival ministry came to a screeching halt; it was over.

Therefore, you may wonder why we do those prayer vigils each month. You may wonder why we put such an emphasis on prayer. Remember this story; nothing of significance will happen in the kingdom of God apart from the people of God praying in the sovereign move of God’s Spirit. Nothing of eternal significance; nothing that is even worth a moment of your time will occur in the kingdom of God unless it is surrounded in prayer in the Holy Spirit.

Fleming was a poor Scottish farmer. One day he heard a cry for help from a nearby bog. A young boy was caught waist deep in mud and faced a slow death. He saved him. The next day a nobleman in a fancy carriage pulled up and offered him some money for saving his son’s life. He said no to the money but yes to an education for his own son. Farmer Fleming’s son graduated and Sir Alexander Fleming went on to discover penicillin. Years later the nobleman’s son was stricken with pneumonia. What saved him? Penicillin. The nobleman’s son’s name was Sir Winston Churchill.

An incredible story...an incredible story... I didn’t make this up! This is too incredible to be made up. Who could’ve made that story up? I’m sharing the story about Daniel Nash and Charles Finney. Obviously, this is a story about the supernatural and the gifts of God. This is definitely a story about the natural. This is about day-to-day life and people living out their lives, doing the right thing, and utilizing the natural gifts, talents and abilities that God has given them. Those are just as much gifts that the Holy Spirit wants to enliven and use. If you hear this story today and say, “Father Joe, that’s just a nice story, what an amazing coincidence”. I have to say something to you here today. Wake up! This is more than a coincidence. This is God’s hand sovereignly at work. This is God’s hand moving through the lives of families, touching people, changing the world through two little boys who happen to live and touch each other’s lives. Sir Winston Churchill, who would go on to lead the world in one of his darkest moments... this is God’s hand. This is God’s Spirit at work, moving, acting and touching people’s lives in wonderful and incredible ways. Beloved of God, we have been given the Holy Spirit to serve. To be a blessing, to be a powerful blessing. It is important for you and I to begin to tap into and to be used by the greatest power source in the entire universe. I don’t care what else the scientists discover. I don’t care... whatever new things they find out about our universe. I mean it’ll be great, it’ll be insightful, it’ll be exciting... I’m a big Star Trek fan, Star Wars fan... I get it! I love it.

You already know and have access to the greatest power relationship that will ever be or could be in your life, which is with the Holy Spirit. I invite us here today to be open afresh on this Pentecost Sunday to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life. If you do not know Jesus as your Lord and Savior today, if you haven’t really come to him, if you’re not quite sure about him, why not come to him today? Today is a good day to be saved. Come to him today. Acknowledge him as Lord and Savior. As you do that, as you come to the altar and do that say, you know what, Lord I want to receive fully and completely from you also the gift of the Holy Spirit. Because I cannot live the life you’re calling me to in
my own strength and power. I want to live in relationship with the ultimate power source, the ultimate power being of the Holy Spirit.”

Let us begin to really walk in that. I cannot walk and that for you, I don’t want to. I would never take away that awesome experience that can be uniquely yours, but you have to step out of the boat. You have to step out of the boat. You have to begin to move in ways that will surprise other people and surprise yourself. You have to be open to God moving through you, through the presence of the Spirit in ways that you never thought possible. You and I need to begin to be open to the spiritual dimension like never before. That the light through you and through his church may grow ever greater as the darkness in our world rose ever greater as well.

Fr. Joe Maiocco

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